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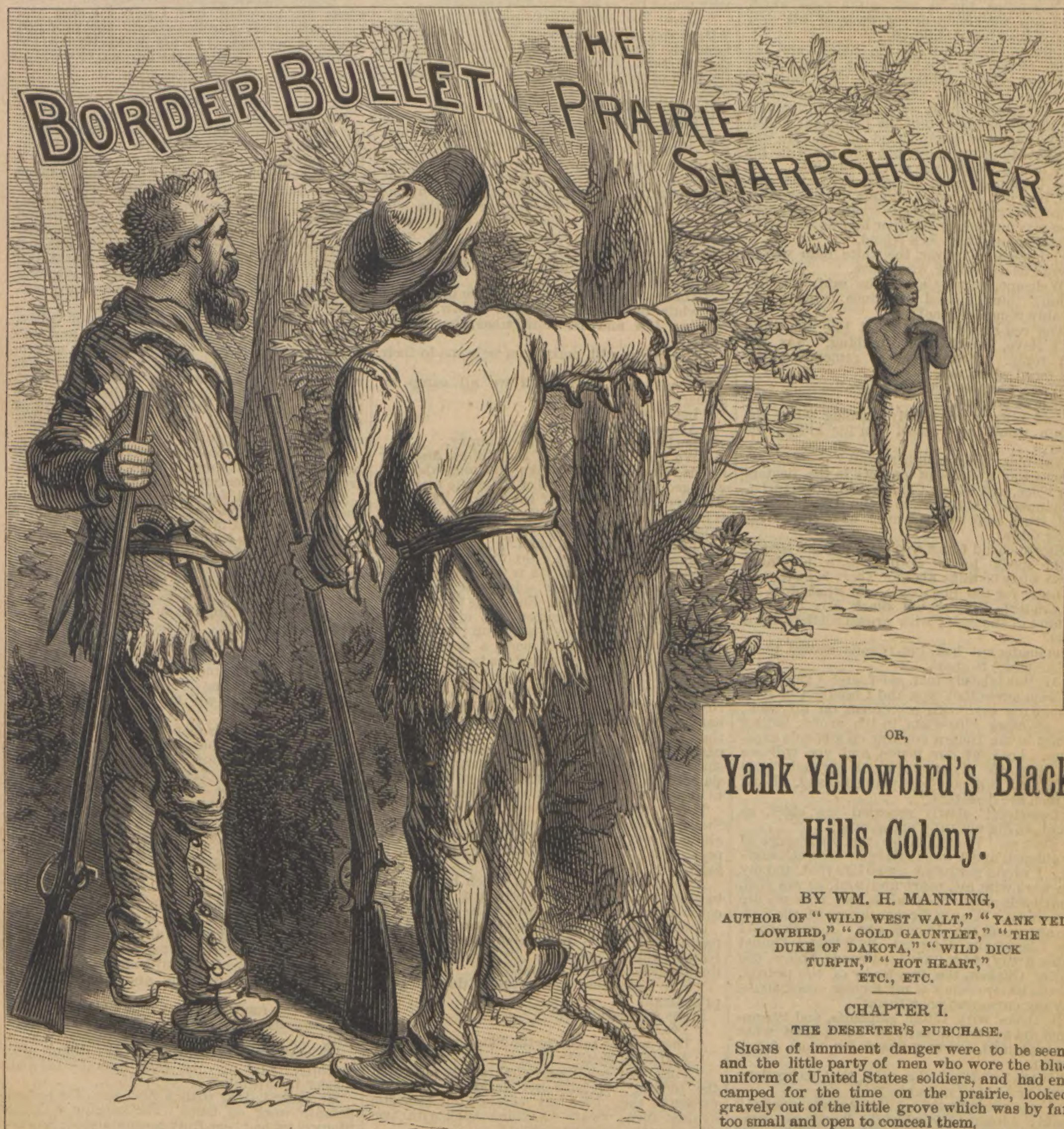
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OR,
Yank Yellowbird's Black
Hills Colony.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "WILD WEST WALT," "YANK YEL-
LOWBIRD," "GOLD GAUNTLET," "THE
DUKE OF DAKOTA," "WILD DICK
TURPIN," "HOT HEART,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DESERTER'S PURCHASE.

SIGNS of imminent danger were to be seen, and the little party of men who wore the blue uniform of United States soldiers, and had encamped for the time on the prairie, looked gravely out of the little grove which was by far too small and open to conceal them.

Sioux Indians, who outnumbered them four to one, were riding directly toward the grove, and discovery seemed inevitable.

"UNLESS WE CAN GET THE BEST OF HIM, YANK," SAID BORDER BULLET, POINTING TO THE MYSTERIOUS INDIAN, "EVERY MEMBER OF OUR PARTY IS DOOMED!"

There is never any marked affection between hostilely-inclined Indians and the soldiers who are on the frontier solely to keep them in check, and at the time of which we write the antagonism had been rendered particularly bitter by recent events. That the Sioux would shed the blood of the blue-coats, when they had a chance, was highly probable, and as this isolated little band of soldiers numbered but twenty, all told, they were in a bad plight. Their horses were worn out by recent, hard and prolonged service, and were as poorly-fitted for running away as their masters were for fighting.

Resistance seemed out of the question.

Grave, indeed, appeared the situation, but he who directed the fortunes of the soldiers, and wore the uniform of a lieutenant, suddenly changed expression. He looked eagerly at the advancing band of red-skins, and then brought his hand forcibly down upon his hip.

"By the fiends, boys!" he cried, "we are all right, after all. I know that band, and the chief who rides at their front. It is Storm-Cloud, and he will not refuse to bear the past in mind. It's dollars to cents that we are saved. My horse—quick, make ready with my horse!"

The speaker made an imperious gesture, and the animal was led forward quickly. He sprung upon its back, and rode boldly from the grove, his face toward the Indians.

He was not quite sure what his reception would be, but it was the only chance, and he knew but vaguely what fear meant. He was a man a little past his thirtieth year, and muscular beyond the average of men. His dark face was full of power, and many would have called him handsome, but it was not a face which would win the confidence of those of his own years or the love of children.

Boldly he rode toward the Sioux, and, as though he had given a signal, the band halted and stood passive, while one of their number rode forward to meet the soldier. Unostentatious and free from any wild manifestation was the Indian's manner, but the lieutenant smiled grimly; he knew Storm-Cloud of old. He was not given to empty show, but the heart in his dusky bosom was savage and revengeful.

The lieutenant soon resorted to pacific gestures, but not by word, motion or expression did the grim red-man indicate whether the recognition was mutual, or whether he was willing to meet the man in blue as a friend.

As they came nearer, the white man waved his hand as a greeting, and spoke.

"Welcome, Storm-Cloud!" he said, heartily. "I don't think I need introduce myself; you probably remember me?"

"The red-man's mind is not like the white man's sieve, which holds nothing," was the calm reply. "Storm-Cloud remembers the dark-faced white man."

"We met at the fort, you know."

"It is as you say."

"And I gave you timely warning when the captain would have seized you for killing the trader."

"The blue-coat remembers well."

There was a shade of anxiety in the lieutenant's voice, and Storm-Cloud's cold, imperturbable manner did not serve to lessen it.

"I trust that we now meet as friends," the soldier added.

"Storm-Cloud is not a woman, that his tongue should speak hasty words before his mind knows what he talks about. There is no love in his heart for the blue-coats, and what does he see yonder? Why should Black Fox come to the land of the Sioux with armed soldiers at his back?"

The lieutenant had impatiently waited to secure a chance to speak.

"All this is easily told, chief, and I think you will soon agree that you and I need not be foes. You see me here with a uniform on my back; you see other blue-coats in the grove; but we are not in the Indian country on a hostile expedition. Look at our horses, and you will see that they are about worn out through hard usage. All this can be explained easily. I and my men are deserters!"

"Deserters!" slowly repeated the chief, as though he did not fully understand.

"Even so. We fell under the displeasure of our colonel, and I was in danger of court-martial. I would not brook usage like that, and my men were with me, heart and soul; so we took to our heels and to the prairie, and now we are free rovers. We are forever done with the fort, the army and the Government. A week ago I was Lieutenant Edmund Burkleigh, United States Army; now I am Lieutenant Nolaw, the Soldier Outcast, the free-lance of the prairie, and the bitter enemy of my former associates—may my curse rest upon them!"

He spoke with bitter emphasis, and Storm-Cloud did not find it hard to understand what was explained, but he thirsted for more information.

"What had Black Fox done, that his brothers should be so hard upon him?"

"I was out with the soldiers you see yonder," frankly explained Burkleigh, "and we came upon a wagon-train of emigrants. It was on their complaint we were disgraced; they said we misused them. I say we only drank their

whisky, made love to their women, and mildly compelled some of their men to run the gantlet. Mere trifles, Storm-Cloud, but the colonel of the post listened to their complaint and believed. He was kind enough to say that my past record was bad, and that he could bear no more, fiends seize him!"

The speaker made a fierce gesture, and his lips parted in a wolfish expression born of evil passions.

"Well, the colonel threatened me with court-martial, and then I knew what to do. I turned my back on the post and, followed by the manly souls who were in for disgrace with me, took to the prairie. I shall never go back, nor will my men: we are done with the accursed army. I am an outcast, a free rover—call me what you will. I have renounced the army, my country, and all things connected with them. I renounce my very name. I am no longer Burkleigh, but Lieutenant Nolaw. That means that I despise law; that I grind it under heel. Chief, I aided you once; aid me now. Receive me as your friend and brother, and if the soldiers come, I and my hearts of oak will fight with you against them!"

The Sioux's command of English language was unusually good for one of his race, and though much of what he had heard was not intelligible to him, he comprehended enough. More, he believed what he heard. He knew that Burkleigh was an unscrupulous wretch, and as he had a fondness for such persons, his decision was soon made.

It was not a thing to be despised to have a score of United States soldiers, deserters though they might be, as his allies and associates.

"Black Fox has spoken well," he returned. "His heart is big, and he could no more crouch under the whip of the pale-face leaders than can the red-men. Black Fox, you are welcome to the land of the Sioux—you and your braves in blue."

Burkleigh's face flushed with pleasure.

"Your words are kind, and they make me happy, for it is in the land of the Sioux we must live from this day. We are deserters, to use plain English, and our lives would be forfeit if we went back. We are soldiers no longer, but free rovers. I did think of cutting the buttons from my uniform, and sending them to the colonel, but it occurred to me that we could worry him more by wearing the blue rags in our new, free, lawless life."

"Well do the red-men call my brother the Fox, for he is deep and cunning."

"Thanks! Call me so; I like the name; but my white name, henceforth, is Nolaw. I am without law and its restrictions; hence, the name."

"The Sioux will make you welcome to their country."

"Good! And now, shall we all camp together?"

"Let it be so."

"Are you on the war-path?"

The chief looked annoyed and angry.

"We went out against the whites, and our hearts were eager to strike the men who had wronged us, but the God of the white man was stronger than the arms of the Sioux. My heart is heavy, for we return without a scalp, and two pale-faced women are our only prisoners."

"I'm sincerely sorry, chief."

"Speak of it no more. Go to your men, and we will camp together. It is well for your men that they are no longer soldiers of the White Father, and that Black Fox leads them. Had they been what they seemed, not one of them would have lived to see yonder sun rise again."

The fierce-faced chief made a gesture, and then turned and rode toward his band.

In a short time the arrangement was perfected, and the two parties camped in harmony. Not yet did they assimilate, however; it was hard for either to forget the past and realize that they were to be friends. The Sioux, in particular, were moved beyond stoicism by the state of affairs; just when they were longing to slaughter a number of soldiers, they were asked to give them the right hand of friendship.

There was no doubt as to result, however. Storm-Cloud was shrewd enough to see that the alliance was greatly to the advantage of his people, and his word was law with the party he led.

A short address from him which he proposed to make when opportunity occurred, would also cause all his warriors to think as he thought.

A close observer would have seen that Lieutenant Nolaw paid particular attention to the female captives mentioned by the chief, and he finally spoke of them abruptly.

"May I ask what you mean to do with your prisoners?"

"The white squaws?"

"Yes."

"They will be taken to the Sioux village."

"And what then?"

"Time will tell," somewhat curtly answered the Indian. "I have not decided. They are useless to me. I led my warriors out to battle against men; we are marching back with two white squaws as our trophies."

The chief paused, made a contemptuous gesture, and added:

"The heart of the Sioux does not run to pale squaws, and he only keeps them because he may make the white dogs squirm like a man at the torture-fire."

"I will buy them of you."

"You?"

"Yes."

The men exchanged glances. Storm-Cloud's face bore a wondering expression, while the deserter was cool and steady.

"Why should my brother want them? They are not young and fair, and one is ugly with age."

"True, but she can do our cooking—if she will. If not, we can turn her over to you and let you cook her."

Burkleigh laughed at his supposed jest, and then added:

"We have two extra horses in our party. I will give them to you for the women, only stipulating that I need not deliver the horses until the women are at our camp; they must have some way of riding. As for the camp, I depend upon you to tell me where we can best locate. Both my men and their horses need rest, and I want you to suggest some safe place in the hills where we can locate. Conduct us there, and then leave the women and take the horses. Is it a bargain?"

The chief's face bore a crafty, speculative expression.

"The heart of Storm-Cloud is big," he replied, modestly, "and he is willing to help his brother. Black Fox will need some one to cook his venison. Give me a blanket with each horse, and the women belong to my brother."

"Done!" Burkleigh promptly agreed. "Your terms are accepted, and I only ask that you take care of my purchases until the proposed refuge is reached. I do not want them to see me distinctly. Consider the bargain closed!"

CHAPTER II.

NOLAW EXPLAINS.

AMONG the hills of Siouxland was a little valley which seemed cut out of the rough country surrounding it for some purpose which it might take another century to reveal. Certainly, it could not have been merely to furnish a home for red Indians and soldier deserters, yet, for the time, it was occupied by just such persons.

Storm-Cloud had conducted Burkleigh and his men to the inter-mountain recess, and the deserters had at once decided that it was just suited to their purpose. It was to be approached only by a tortuous course through environing canyons, and they did not believe that any pursuing soldiers could find them there.

The Sioux camped one night in the valley, but Storm-Cloud had other work to do and was ready to go. His warriors were drawn up preparatory to departure, and the deserters felt rather sorry to see them go. Barred out from association with honest men of their own race by their crimes and flight from the shadow of the old flag, they had found the companionship of the savages congenial.

And when they went the deserter-band would number but twenty men, and be in more danger from the loyal wearers of the blue.

Burkleigh said farewell to Storm-Cloud, and then the red band rode away. The deserters watched them out of sight, and then the lieutenant turned to his followers.

"Men," he said, with a show of hearty confidence, "our new life begins this hour. We are no longer soldiers, and we know no law but our own will. We are free-rovers—prairie pirates, if you will—anything but subjects of the United States Government. We have forsaken our allegiance to the craven gang who rule in civilized parts, and we now know only the wild life of the prairie and mountains. We shall live a jolly life, too. Game is abundant, and Storm-Cloud will make all the Sioux nation our friends."

He paused, and his men cheered lustily.

"Good! I like your pluck. And now, let us get to work at once. We must build cabins here to cover us. Look at the means! The noble forest comes down with a grand sweep from the mountain-top yonder. We have but three axes, and we can't build our village in a day. We must be patient and industrious, and, one of these days, a fine home will be ours. I have only one thing more to say."

Again he paused, and his dark face grew fierce and vindictive.

"I command you, let no man call me Burkleigh from this hour! I have cast off the name, even as I have cast off my allegiance to the cowardly Government. I curse all that I was a week ago! Henceforth, my name is Lieutenant Nolaw. Bear it in mind, and call me by no other name."

"Hurrah for Lieutenant Nolaw!" cried one of the deserters, and the cheer was given with a will.

"Thank you, my hearts of oak; thank you warmly. And now, let each man be his own master for a while."

He walked away with a firm step, for he had definite work on hand. The bargain with the Sioux chief had been fully consummated: Storm-Cloud had taken away the two horses, and the white captives had been left behind. Thus far

Nolaw had kept at a distance, and had not spoken to the women so coolly purchased, as though they were so many cattle; nor had he given them chance to see him clearly.

He had good reasons for this, but the time of revelation had arrived.

The women, who had been placed in a recess in a cliff with a guard to watch them, were very different in nearly every respect.

The younger was named Agnes Prior. She was only thirty years of age, but suffering had left its imprint on her worn face, and she looked older. She was rather taller than women average, and slenderly built, but her form was graceful in every outline, and her movements willowy and easy. Her face was a refined one, and trouble had not, by far, obliterated all traces of beauty that must once have been pronounced. It was a good face, and one that was full of patient firmness. As a captive she had been sad and silent, but she had borne her misfortunes with dignity.

The second woman, who never hesitated to give her name as Abigail Longstreeter, had left fifty-seven years of her allotted span of life in the caves of the dead past. But there was a good deal of Abigail still left. Not in the way of flesh, for she was emaciated to a marked degree; but her powers of speech were unimpaired. She was bony and angular; her garments were poor of quality and poor of fit; her face was sharp, stubborn and vixenish; her eyes had the misfortune to represent two shades of color—one being black and the other gray; an ambitious mustache was trying to grace her upper lip; an old-fashioned bonnet of huge size covered her head, but only partially concealed her hair, which stood out in stubborn, erratic wisps; and she clung at all times to a cane, which she rarely used to support her weight, but conveyed under her arm, horizontally.

Abigail had not been a patient prisoner. She had railed at the Indians as waspishly as she could, and as her ability in that line was great she made a decided success—or would have done so if she and her talk had not been ignored.

Lieutenant Nolaw heard her talking as he approached the recess in the cliff.

"It's an outrageous, burnin' shame!" she declared, "an' I don't care who hears me say it. Don't tell me these men are of our own color! What on't? Ain't they MEN, an' ain't that enough ter brand 'em? You may not know men, but I do! Perhaps you know some good on 'em, but I don't. I never knew a man yit who wa'n't a drunkard. What can we expect from sech creetur's? Villainy! an' that's what we git. I know what drink does! I've seen the effek on't. I want ye ter know I am a prohibitionist, an' a flower o' the flock. I'm down on rum, an' I'm goin' ter say so while I have breath. I b'long ter the Anti-Demon-of-Drink Society, an' man, drunken man, is my nat'r'l enemy. I'm after him, an' I'll git him!"

And Abigail thrust out with her cane as though it were a sword, and she was trying to impale a drunkard.

Nolaw motioned to one of his men, who at once approached.

"Take that loud-mouthed virago away," he directed, "and keep her until I direct you to bring her back."

The minor deserter saluted and proceeded to obey. Abigail met the change with loud remonstrances, but was unceremoniously led away. Nolaw then entered the recess.

Agnes Prior looked up in doubt which was not unmixed with uneasiness. She no longer placed reliance in the blue uniforms which had, at first, seemed a guarantee of protection.

The lieutenant nodded coolly.

"How do you do? I've dropped in for a little chat," was his off-hand remark.

"Have you?" she vaguely asked.

"Yes. I hope you are comfortable, Mrs. Prior."

She started and looked at him wonderingly.

"How do you know my name?"

"I ought to. Don't you recognize me?"

"No. I—"

She suddenly paused; a new expression swept over her face; and she grew pale to the lips.

"I see you do recognize me, Mrs. Prior," the deserter added, smiling.

"You are Edmund Burkleigh!" she exclaimed.

"Even so. You hardly expected to see me, did you? Well, the surprise is mutual. We have not met since your divorce, you know."

"In heaven's name, do not speak of that!" she exclaimed, almost wildly.

"Why not?"

"Let my wretched life be buried in the grave of the past."

"Nonsense! Pray don't get nervous; such things will happen. I don't blame you for giving Dick Prior the slip, and running away with handsome Reginald Eyre."

"I did not run away with him—"

"Witnesses at the trial said you did, and your husband got a divorce because of that sensational elopement."

"They lied!—the witnesses lied!—or they were terribly deceived. I believe no one knows this better than you, Edmund Burkleigh; I believe

you aided Reginald Eyre to ruin my reputation, and sunder me from my husband."

Agnes Prior's voice rung out sharply, and her slender fingers worked nervously together as she looked into the cool, pitiless face above her, with the expression of a lost soul expelled from Paradise.

"Have you convinced Dick Prior?" sneered the deserter.

The woman's head fell forward.

"You are one of the men to whom I owed my ruin, and I believe you deliberately plotted to do it." Then she suddenly raised her head, her eyes flashed, and she added in a ringing voice: "I was innocent, and you know it. I married Richard Prior because I loved him, and I hated and feared Reginald Eyre. You were Eyre's friend, and you know—you must know!—that I was innocent. Eyre and I did not go away together, and I had no clew to his movements. I was the victim of circumstances, or of a fiendish plot, and my life was wrecked."

Vehement as her utterance was at one time, it faltered toward the close, and there was touching sorrow and pathos in the last words, but Nolaw remained unmoved.

"Well, never mind," he returned; "I don't care, one way or the other. Where is Prior?"

"Heaven help me! I don't know."

"Skipped out, eh?" coarsely continued the lieutenant.

"He has not been near me since he secured the divorce. Edmund Burkleigh, you were Eyre's friend, and must know something about the case. If you will tell me how to prove that Eyre went away alone, not with me, I will pray for you to the end of my life."

Nolaw laughed aloud.

"Too late, my lady; I am past praying for; I am done with praying people. Know you that I and the gallant fellows you see with me are not soldiers any longer, but deserters, free-lances, prairie freebooters—call us anything you will. That's why you are with us. I recognized you when you were Storm-Cloud's captive, and I rather pitied you, so I bought you."

"Bought me?"

"Like a slave of *ante-bellum* days. Your price was a horse and a gray blanket with a red border—you came high. But I was merciful; I bought you."

"And now?"

She was looking at him in quiet despair.

"You are appointed chief of the culinary department. Believe me, this is no insult to you, nor do I ask you to be a drudge. On the contrary, I have an idea that I shall some day unite you and Reginald Eyre."

"Heaven forbid!"

"Are you really over your fancy for him?"

"I never fancied him; I hated him."

Nolaw shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it as you will, Mrs. Prior."

"And you insist upon keeping me a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"As a slave?" she added, half-inquiringly, half in a declaratory manner.

"Don't use such a blunt term. We shall hold you prisoner, treating you well, and asking you to supervise our culinary department, as I said before. Blame me if you will, but remember that I saved you from the Sioux; I am not such a villain as you think. For your sake that fossilized old maid with the tongue of vinegar shall go along, though I would prefer to feed her to the buzzards. Don't worry, Mrs. Prior; you shall be well used, but you will be kept a prisoner in the full sense of the word."

He spoke with an air of candor, but she placed little faith in his word. She was about to make an appeal for mercy, asking to be set at liberty, though she knew she was many scores of miles from any town or military post, but the conviction that entreaties would be futile caused her to remain silent.

Nolaw had said all that he cared to then, and, as he saw her mood, he added a few parting words and strolled away. Abigail Longstreeter was returned to the recess, and the captives were again left with the deserter guard at the entrance.

CHAPTER III.

THE TALL MOUNTAINEER.

NIGHT fell over the deserters' camp. The men had done a little toward constructing their proposed village, but not enough to have any shelter. They built a huge fire next to a cliff, and, gathered around it, passed an evening that was jovial almost to a hilarious degree. Thus far the life of a deserter pleased them well. The discipline of army life was thrown off, and they were as happy as school-boys, and far more dangerous.

It was well for Nolaw's influence over them that they had no liquor with which to satisfy their appetites.

Gradually their exuberance of spirits grew less, as drowsiness crept upon them, and they sought their blankets. Every man was soon stretched out by the fire, except the one guard who was required to pace in front of the niche which served as prison for the captives. Nolaw did not fear attack, and this guard, too, would have been allowed to sleep had it not been for the women.

As it was, he served a double purpose.

Two hours passed. All the deserters seemed to be fast asleep, and only for the big fire and the pacing guard, the valley would have seemed as quiet as before the disgraced soldiers came. Their horses were further down the valley, and they, too, were glad to rest.

The single guard felt himself an ill-used person. All his comrades were sleeping, and envy filled his breast. True, he was to be relieved, anon, but it seemed a nuisance, after casting off his allegiance to the Government, that he was obliged to do guard duty.

Looking sulkily toward the women, who gave no sign of consciousness, he paused and leaned against the corner of the recess. This did very well for a while, but presently it occurred to him that it was not a very easy position, and he sat down on a boulder.

That was better—decidedly so. It was comfortable and easy. The deserter felt at peace with the whole world, and his mind wandered to other scenes; just where, he did not know. His nodding head seemed to need a rest, and he planted his chin in the hollow of his hand. He slept.

There was a waving of the grass; something arose above the ground which would have looked like the fur-covered hide of an animal had it not been for a human face beneath it; a pair of keen eyes surveyed the camp; the head dropped, and then a human form came crawling, snake-like, through the grass.

The intruder slowly approached the sleeping guard, his caution and skill being something remarkable. Not a sound betrayed his advance, and the deserter slept on. The light of the fire, falling on the creeping man, revealed a bearded individual in a fur cap and fringed hunting-suit. His face was that of a white man; his appearance that of a veteran borderer.

He gained a position near the negligent guard, and then slowly arose until he was on his feet but crouched like a panther ready for a leap. Suddenly one strong arm was cast around the deserter; the latter was jerked violently backward; in a moment more he was lying on his back with the assailant kneeling on his breast. He awoke to find a knife flashing before his eyes, and to hear a low, stern, steady voice uttering a warning in his ears.

"Be still, ye atrocious insect! I ain't no butcher, an' you're safe ef ye don't make a fuss; but ef you try ter give an alarm I'll skulp ye—if I will, by hurley!"

The threat was made with every appearance of sincerity, and the face above the deserter was stern and menacing, but even then the frightened guard found cause for hope. Despite the sanguinary threat he had a vague conviction that his assailant was no mere desperado. He felt that he could save his life if he was wise, and, winking rapidly as the keen blade of the knife shot back the reflection of the fire-light into his eyes, he gasped:

"Don't touch me!—I give up!"

"Glad on't, by mighty! I consait you are a wise man, mister, an' I'm glad on't. You'd probly b'en a perfessor in a college institoot ef ye hadn't hung out yer shingle as a rascal. There are more rascals who hang out shingles than the signs tell on. You can't tell a man's pedigree by his perfession, or his tombstone. He lies in one, an' lies under t'other. Easy, now, fur I mean ter put an encumbrance onter yer wrists."

"What do you want?" the deserter asked.

"Nothin' much. Don't take me fur a beggar, do ye?"

"I warn you not to injure me."

"Land o' Goshen! ain't I already said I wa'n't goin' ter? Now see hyar, don't begin by doubtin' my word, fur such things lead ter egregious tribulations sometimes. Be stiddy, an' you're as safe as a baby in its cradle—an' safer, fur babies are subjet ter croup, measles, rhoomatiz, indigestion an' rumbago."

While speaking the tall intruder had been busy, and certain ropes which he had with him were tied around the guard's wrists and ankles with dexterity only to be gained by long practice. Having thus reduced his prisoner to a helpless state, he thrust a piece of cloth into his mouth and the work was done.

"That's all I want o' you, mister," the victor pursued, "so you needn't worry an' artom. Feelsophy is a good plant ter cultivate, though it won't grow on poor sile. Ef you kin conveniently do it, take matters cool."

The intruder stood erect. He glanced at the heavy-sleeping men around the fire, and then into the recess. He had hardly done so before a female form glided forward, and he stood face to face with Agnes Prior.

"Sir," she said, with manifest agitation, "may I speak with you?"

"To be sure, but say it quick," the borderer replied.

"I have seen what has occurred here, and know that you are not the friend of these men. I am their prisoner, together with another woman, and we are anxious to escape. I have seen your face by the fire-light, and believe that it is that of an honest man; and I ask you to give us a helping hand and aid us to escape. Tell me I have not appealed in vain!"

She spoke with feverish haste, but the tall stranger stroked his beard with quiet composure.

"I consait you don't fully understand why I'm hyar," he replied. "I ain't a devourin' monstre, an' I don't go 'round tyin' men up without an objick. My objick in this case was ter git you away from the atrocious insex."

"To rescue us?"

"To be sure."

"Thank Heaven!—thank Heaven! Sir, I do not know you, but my heart tells me I can trust you. Help us as you say, and may Heaven bless you!"

"I reckon Heaven does bless them as is de-sarvin', fur thar is a Power that weighs men an' their deeds in the balance, an' keeps the a'count with marvelous skill an' marcy; but we won't stop ter talk on't now. Ef one o' them sleepers awake, thar may be the wu'st racket you ever heer'n—thar may, by hurley! Git your frien', an' let us off faster'n a grasshopper kin go fur a wager."

The man in the hunting-suit spoke quietly, but his eyes were keen and watchful. He realized the danger, and was on the alert to guard against it. Without raising useless alarm he had impressed the need of haste upon Agnes, and she glided back into the recess.

Fortunately for her, she had seen the would-be rescuer before he made his attack on the deserter, and had awakened and cautioned Abigail Longstreeter. Knowing what a tongue the woman possessed, and how lamentably she was lacking in discretion, she had done her best to frighten her into silence.

For once, at least, Abigail listened to reason, and not a word fell from her lips.

They emerged from the recess ready for departure, and the hunter nodded approvingly.

"Foller me!" he directed, sententiously, and then turned and walked slowly away.

Agnes and Abigail kept close to his side, and there was a general feeling of relief when they had passed beyond the reach of the fire-light and the deserters slept on peacefully. At that point the rescuer secured a long rifle evidently lately left there by himself, but not a word was spoken until a safe distance had been put between them and the camp. Then the stranger suddenly turned upon them.

"I trust," he mildly observed, "that I ain't given ter improper cur'osity, but I'd like ter know how you came ter be in sech an egregious fix?"

"The story may be quickly told. We were at the settlement called Red Deer Trail when we were captured by a war-party of Sioux led by a chief called Storm-Cloud—"

"I know of the egregious varmint."

"He took us north until we met yonder men, who are, by their own confession, deserters from the fort, and then the chief sold us outright to the leader of the deserters."

"Enough fur now; I'll hear the rest anon. I felt sure I was justified in helpin' ye, but I wanted more light, fur I shall be obleeged ter 'pro-priate two hosses fur your use. Some folks would call it stealin', but, land o' Goshen! I can't see it in that light. Desarters, be they? Wal, they stole the hosses from the Government, then, an' a dose o' their own medicine won't harm 'em, they not bein' doctors. Wait fur me!"

He hastened away with the light step which seemed a peculiarity of the man. Abigail was very angry to think that Agnes had thought it necessary to tell her not to talk, and, wishing to have her revenge, she decided, for once, that the way to secure it was to say nothing. And Abigail was wise beyond her knowledge; she did not worry Mrs. Prior, but it did avert the danger her shrill voice would have invited if she had used her powers of speech.

The borderer soon returned leading three horses, one of which was his own, and followed by a dog. The start was quickly made, and they rode away from the valley which Agnes hoped never to see again.

"Words are weak to express my gratitude," she said, breaking the silence, "but I thank you warmly."

"That's all right, but I've only done my duty. It's a mean man that won't help a woman when she's in tribulation an' distress, an' the honor o' my fam'ly pedigree demanded that I set you free."

"You ran a great risk."

"Resks are the daily life of the Nor'west mountaineer. He meets 'em as he does his sleep at night an' his food by day—as a nec'sary thing. Danger faces him pooty much all the time, but what does he keer? Ain't he got the prairies, an' mountains an' woods as his frien's an' companions? Give me my hoss an' dog, an' I don't keer how thick the danger hems me in; not that I like scenes o' strife an' animosity, for I don't, but thar is a sort o' pleasure in slippin' through the nets that mean critters spread fur your feet. Thar is, by hurley!"

"I am not accustomed to such a life. I am afraid I am not made of heroic material."

"We hev ter git used ter tribulations afore we l'arn ter like 'em; I know, fur I've had my share. I've b'en in a heap o' egregious fixes since I've b'en a citizen o' this world. I had all the chronic, prevailin' an' authorducks com-

plaints in my infantry ter which babies is heir, an' they went hard with me. The coroner was called in regular once a week, the folks thinkin' I was about gone, but I hated the man, impersonally, an' when I seen him around I always recovered my faculties an' throwed off the epidemic. Had an egregious time with my fu'st teeth, an' they'd never got through the lucus henbane o' my jaws ef a dentist hadn't pulled 'em half-way out with a pair o' biceps. It hurt like hurley!"

The tall borderer shook his head gravely, as though memory was calling up occurrences overpoweringly sad.

"I l'arned ter smoke when I's eight years old," he resumed. "I didn't want ter do it, but the disease got epidemical an' I fell victim to it. A big boy loaded the pipe an' give it to me.

"Now pull, sez he.

"Don't think I kin,' sez I.

"Why not?" sez he.

"I'm weak," sez I, "an' this pipe looks egre-gious strong."

"Don't ye want ter be a man?" sez he.

"Yes," sez I, "but I don't want ter be an angel."

"Smoke, you dunce!" sez he. "The pipe is all right, an' the terbacker as mild as a May day."

"This was encouragin' an' I influted my lungs an' pulled like a mustard-plaster. Land o' Goshen! how it did upset me! The atrocious smoke went a-circlin' all through my system, an' I felt as though a hundred wasps was stingin' my nostrils an' the local organs o' speech; an' a reg'lar cloud o' the smoke went down on my lungs. I spent the next five minutes coughin' an' sneezin', but the big boy encouraged me, an' I kep' on until I got the secret o' the thing, an' smoked quite glib an' animated. But arter awhile I began ter feel a condemned disturbance internally, an' I laid down the pipe.

"Don't think I'll smoke any more," sez I.

"Ain't you wal?" said the big boy, snickerin'.

"Yes," sez I; "I feel uncommon pert."

"You look pale," sez he.

"That's a fash'nable color," sez I.

"I've made ye sick," sez he, "an' you're the third boy I've fixed that way ter-day; an' then be laughed obstreperously.

"Is that the kind o' a pirate you be?" sez I. "Do you go 'round ter prey on the weak an' helpless?" sez I, gittin' mad as hurley, as my stomach rolled up cl'ar ter my palate. "Oh! you Judas!" sez I, "you glory in my pangs, do ye? Please ye, does it? Made me sick on purpose, did ye?" sez I, cryin' with rage an' sickness o' the interior department. "I'll teach yer ter play yer tricks an' hoe-axes onter me!"

"An' with that I fell onter him with great venom an' both fists, an' I consait I thrashed him like hurley. Arter that thar was a coolness 'twixt us, an' he never offered me a smoke outer his egregious old pipe ag'in."

CHAPTER IV.

YANK YELLOWBIRD'S HUT.

THE guide suddenly came to a halt, and for a moment his head was bent as though to listen carefully. Then he abruptly grasped the rein of both the other horses.

"Lay low!" he exclaimed, his manner hurried but calm. "Git ter cover, or we may hev an egregious tribulation."

Quickly he led the animals into a recess of one of the cliffs which shut in the course they were following, and the entire party came to a halt.

Agnes Prior looked in vain to discover the cause of this sudden movement. The gulch was quite dark, preventing her from seeing far in advance, and no unusual sound met her organs of hearing. Was the guide really right, or had he been deceived by some fancied danger? He sat like a statue on his horse, and if he had a doubt he did not express it. Abigail Longstreeter leaned toward Agnes and loudly whispered:

"I b'lieve the man has b'en drinkin'!"

The borderer quietly touched her arm.

"Keep quiet, or mebbe you'll git skulped," he said, warningly; "not that I'd do it, but thar are them who would. Be still, an' listen!"

There was the ring of a horse's feet on some rocky surface; even Agnes heard it now; and a horseman suddenly appeared in the darkness ahead of them. Agnes trembled, but there was no danger. The unknown went quietly on, his face turned toward the deserters' camp. Who, or what, he was she could not tell, but the guide's eyes were keener.

"An Injun!" he said, and he led the horses from the recess and the journey was resumed.

"Is there danger?"

"I consait not. The chances are he was one o' Storm-Cloud's men, on his way ter them white insex, an' thar will be a commotion pooty soon, but I don't imagine they'll ketch us. I don't, by hurley!"

His calm, modest confidence was very encouraging to Agnes, who was learning to trust him more than ever with each minute. He turned slowly to Abigail.

"You said suthin' about drinkin'."

"I did, an' I stick to it!" the maiden lady answered, with Spartan firmness.

"Stick ter what?"

"What I said."

"What did you say?"

"I gave it as my opinion that you'd b'en drinkin'."

"I have!"

Abigail clasped her hands and rolled her eyes upward.

"What is this sinful world a-comin' to?" she demanded, in a voice full of pathos and melody of the saw-filing order. "What would the sisters of the Anti-Demon-of-Drink Society say to this? Here is a man who boldly avows that he has b'en drinkin'! Oh, degen'rate age! Oh! cankerous degradation! Oh! the horrors of the vile compound that steals away men's brains an' makes 'em brutes. Oh! oh!"

"Oh! oh! oh!" echoed the guide, with wonderfully accurate imitation of Miss Abigail's cracked voice, and an indescribably humorous vein, in addition. "Land o' Goshen! what is all the rum-pus about? May I inquire who in hurley you be, an' what you're lamentin' about?"

"Sir, you may. I am not ashamed of my name, for it is blazoned onter the temple o' fame. I am Abigail Longstreeter, late o' Cloveryard, State o' Connecticut, an' I am a warrior with shield buckled onter me ter fight Rum. I b'long ter the Anti-Demon-o-Drink Society, an' I am crushin' the rum power down. That's who I be!"

"A temp'rance orator, be ye?"

"Sir, I am."

"How's trade?"

"Sir?"

"Make many convicts at the deserters' scamp-meetin', ter-night?"

"Sir, do you want ter insult me?"

"Wouldn't do it fur the world, arter your kind statement that I'd b'en drinkin', as you call it."

"You admitted the charge."

"B'ar in mind I didn't say what I'd b'en drinkin'. I don't mind sayin' now that cold water is the strongest thing I've imbibed fur a week. True, I keep a supply o' the real, giner-wine article at the camp, but it's fur use in case Border Bullet, Guv'nor or I git a bullet wound. Ain't much given ter drinkin' speerits, myself. My first ancestor, Adam Yellowbird, left a printed dissipation on the subjick o' drunkardness. He'd b'en what they called insultin' physician—though why the term is used I don't know, by hurley!—at sev'ral or more large horspittles, an' he had a chance ter see the effeks o' whisky in all its mel'cholly animosity; and when he moved ter the Garden o' Eden, an' married Eve-Smith, he blossomed out as a hist'ry man, and wrote the dissipation warnin' all the Yellowbirds ter let the stuff alone, except fur medicine."

Agnes was looking earnestly at the speaker.

"May I ask your name, sir?" she said.

"Yank Yellowbird, it's pronounced."

"Now, indeed, we are safe!" Mrs. Prior exclaimed.

"How so?"

"Do you think I have never heard of you, sir? Every one talks about Yank Yellowbird, the brave, sympathetic, quaint and noble mountaineer. They say—"

"I hope they don't say no great hurt on him?" hastily interrupted the guide.

"No, no; they say only good."

"I've seen them who didn't, but I consait they was egregious insex who had no sense o' honor."

"I have often hearn how you nobly seize every chance to aid the weak, helpless and deserving against evil-doers."

"Somethin' in this line I hev done," the mountaineer replied, quietly. "A man can't spend as many year on the border as I hev done an' not run afoul scampish contrivin', now an' then, an' when he does, what's he ter do?"

The speaker paused for a moment, and then, striking his hand upon his rifle, more emphatically added:

"Ef he's a man, he'll help them who is right, ev'ry time! Yes, I've done some good ter honest folks in trouble, an' specially ter feminines. Why not? Why did the good Lord give me these strong arms, unless 'twas ter help other honest folks, as wal as myself?"

Agnes listened with interest which words of hers could not have expressed. She had not spoken in a spirit of flattery when she said that she had heard of Yank Yellowbird. She had heard of him often; and men dwelt at length on his honesty, his courage, his skill as a borderman and his whimsical conceits. After days of captivity and danger, marked with painful forebodings as to the future, she found the tall mountaineer her protector, and in the revulsion of feeling consequent upon the knowledge, she could almost have fallen at his feet, and dropped tears and kisses upon his hard, brown hand.

As it was, she talked with him eagerly, and found a quiet sympathy in all that he said that was encouraging and welcome.

Abigail, happily, was silent, her super-refined soul being filled with disgust at what she considered Agnes's folly and hero-worship. She was more than ever convinced that Yank "had been drinking," and was resolved to manifest her independence of character at all times.

Conversation soon took a practical turn. Agnes was no longer a prisoner, but she was over a hundred miles from the nearest settlement; she was where nature reigned supreme in her varied work of mountain, prairie, forest and river; and she was in the Sioux country where ninety-nine men out of every hundred would be her foes, and extremely dangerous foes at that. Indeed, Yank was not sure that within a radius of one hundred miles any man, white or red, could be found whom they could depend upon, when the inmates of his hut were left out of consideration.

He had, at the hut, as present companions, a young hunter known as Border Bullet, and a negro boy called "Guv'nor."

Considering all these points it became a question of some importance to know what was to be done with Agnes and Abigail. If Yank conducted them to the settlements it would necessitate a journey, all told, of two hundred and fifty miles, and he did not evince alacrity to make the trip. On the other hand, he stated that he expected a party of hunters, some of whom were his friends, to pass south within a fortnight, and he added that, if the idea pleased Agnes, she could wait at his hut until they came and then go to the settlements in their company.

As this seemed to be the only plan just to both parties, Mrs. Prior readily agreed to it, but the final decision was delayed for the time.

In the meanwhile they had left the more mountainous country, and were proceeding northwest, over a broken prairie. Yank hoped to reach his hut several hours before daybreak, and, having thrown difficulties in the way of pursuit by riding for some distance through the waters of a large stream, they pressed on rapidly.

The mountaineer bubbled with good humor and quaint remarks, told numerous stories, and spoke more fully of what he called his "Body-Guard." This consisted, he explained, of the young hunter, Border Bullet; the negro boy, Guv'nor; and his dog and horse. Of the last two members, the canine rejoiced in the name of Moses, while the horse was called Remorse.

The hut and its inmates were quite well photographed in Mrs. Prior's mind before they arrived.

They reached the hut by making the last stage of the journey over a sparsely-wooded prairie. Yank's humble habitation itself stood in a timber-belt, and was located according to the necessities of the roving borderer. Situated in the Indian country, it would be a home no longer than it was a secret resting-place. The Sioux had no love for the tall mountaineer; he and they had often met in contests wherein cunning, powder and ball, strife and muscle had a part, and usually to the discomfiture of the red-men; and they called him "Nevermiss."

Considering the nicety with which they applied names, his *sobriquet* meant a good deal.

All was dark and silent at the hut, as they rode up, but Moses dashed forward and a human figure speedily appeared at the entrance. Yank gave a signal and assisted Agnes to dismount. Miss Longstreeter sprung unaided to the ground. By that time a light showed in the hut, and the previously-mentioned man reappeared.

He was young, being not far from twenty-five, and his face was bold and manly. He wore a hunting-suit more pretentious than Yank's, but free from any approach to ostentation.

"This is Border Bullet," explained the mountaineer. "The name may sound peculiar at first, but it's easy spoke, an' more euphonious than John Smith. Him an' I are makin' the summer camp together—I mean Border Bullet, not John Smith—an' they call him the Prairie Sharpshooter, because he is egregious skillful with a rifle. I daresay you will know him better when you git more acquainted. Border Bullet, how goes the battle?"

"I have seen no Indians, or other foes," the young man replied, with marked emphasis on the word "seen."

"Have you hearn 'em?"

"No."

"Seen sign?"

"Yes. We have nearer neighbors than is agreeable, Nevermiss, when they are red-skinned. As yet, I doubt if they have discovered the hut, but they have wandered nearer than we can approve of."

"It was ter be expected," Yank answered, thoughtfully stroking his beard. "We hev b'en hyar some time, an' when I build fire in the Indian country, they ain't apt ter let it burn without reachin' out fur my skulp. It's s'prisin' what a hankerin' the red insex hev fur this top-knot o' mine, but I consait I need it more nor they do; an' if I didn't, I'm obstin' enough ter keep it, jest ter bother 'em. Most likely we'll hev ter move on. Storm-Cloud is nigh."

"Then mischief is near also."

"I consait so."

"I hope, madam," Border Bullet continued, addressing Agnes, "that you are not alarmed by our talk. The fact that you are in this remote region is, I should say, proof that you will not be surprised to hear danger spoken of."

"Not much, she won't!" Yank agreed. "A

feminine that has been abducted, carried away an' sold inter slavery, gits accustomed ter tribulation and distress, an' ef she's o' good pedigree, she ain't easy ter skeer. Around these visitors o' oun, Border Bullet, hangs a veil o' romance, an' we'll go inter the hut an' talk it over."

CHAPTER V. OLD PORCUPINE.

A HORSEMAN rode down the side of a rocky ridge until, reaching a fountain whose clear waters gushed out from under a ledge, the animal evinced a desire to quench its thirst. The rider dismounted and stood idly by, looking absently at the country before him.

He was a man who had seen about thirty-two years of life. Taller and heavier than the average of men, he had a form which was a model of manly strength. His face, too, was good, being manly and strong, but there was more of sternness in its expression than was agreeable. Thus might a man look if he had met severe misfortunes; had seen his dearest hopes fade away; and bore it all with iron will, in silence, without repining, yet with inward grief which would not be softened by time.

Suddenly his face changed expression slightly; he had discovered, not a hundred yards away, a hut of considerable size, from which smoke slowly arose. He was surprised, for, though not an old borderman, he felt sure that it was not the home of Indians, and he had not expected to find any other habitation in the remote part of the Sioux country.

"The temporary home of some wandering white man, probably," he soliloquized. "I'll investigate. I have seen no human beings except skulking, hostile Indians, for some days, and it will be pleasant to exchange a few words with one of my species. Have you drank enough, Ajax? Then let us on, and see what we have before us."

He remounted, and, without seeing any one, rode to the door of the hut. Then he had what was, indeed, a surprise. A girl suddenly appeared at the entrance. The traveler had stopped his horse, but, at this new sight, he sat in the saddle as incapable of motion as a statue.

A girl in that remote place! A girl who was evidently without Indian blood! His wonder knew no bounds, and he, man of the world that he was, and never at a loss for words in the presence of the fine ladies of civilization—he had nothing to say now.

Yet the girl of the hut was grand only in rare beauty vouchsafed some few of her sex. She was peerlessly beautiful, he thought, and all the more so because untrammled by the treacherous glitter of effete civilization.

She was probably twenty years old, and the image of health. Smaller than the majority of women, she possessed a form as plump, well-rounded and graceful of outline as that of a wild animal. Her complexion was dark, yet clear, and plainly, purely of the white race. Her eyes were black and velvety, and her midnight-colored hair rippled, but did not curl, as it floated over her shoulders without further confinement than the clasp of a red ribbon at the neck. Her dress was part Indian, part wholly original of design. It was of a brown mixture, ornamented here and there with bright red bows, and though the material was coarse, it was highly becoming.

The horseman was dazzled by such loveliness, and stared until she somewhat curtly said:

"Weil, sir?"

He quickly recovered.

"I beg your pardon, young lady. I fear I was rude, but I did not intend it. You may possibly imagine my surprise when I say that I did not suppose there was a white woman within two hundred miles of here."

"Nothing is impossible here, sir," the girl replied, smiling, and conquered of her momentary anger by his courteous manner.

"I begin to believe it, but my wonder is not gone."

"Possibly there is some reason for it. I don't know that there is another white woman anywhere near. This country, for over a hundred miles around, is given up to the Sioux."

"And they are hostile."

"True."

"How dare you live here?"

"I dare say it is because I am not a coward," was the light reply.

"But prudence—"

"Does not count in this case."

"Of course you have protectors?"

"My father. He and I came here last fall, and during the winter he followed the calling of a trapper. We are still here, you see. Father is away, but I expect him home every moment. In his absence let me offer you the hospitality of our humble home. We cannot ask any one to remain long with us, but rest and food we can give you."

Her manner was courteous, yet he felt an undefinable conviction that this border home was not without its secrets. There was a hint not to be disregarded in her last sentence, and he suspected that she was not sure how her father would receive him. The traveler, however, did not hesitate. He already

felt deep interest in these persons, as well as great curiosity to know what had led them to locate in such a wild region. The hardy borderman goes everywhere, but young girls rarely follow his precarious fortunes in remote places where his every hour of existence is shadowed by possible attacks from hostile Indians.

Resolved to see more, and to learn more if he could, the traveler dismounted and entered the hut. His horse was too well trained to wander far away.

The interior of the hut was what might have been expected. Rude as it was, its most glaring features in that line had been greatly toned down by the labor of its young mistress, and the ingenuity with which she had turned the resources of the wood and prairie into ornaments was wonderful, in his opinion. He sat down feeling, somehow, that he had encountered a princess of some enchanted land, like what he had read about when a boy, yet he kept to practical life, outwardly, by the calm face of the mistress of the place.

It was half an hour later when another man approached the hut. He came on foot, carrying a heavy rifle over his shoulder, and often looking backward. There seemed to be uneasiness, if not fear, in these glances, and he muttered to himself as he strode along.

He was a man of middle age, broad-shouldered and muscular, with a big head which was rendered all the larger, in appearance, by his hair and beard, which stood out like the quills of a porcupine, straight, harsh and stubborn. He had an extremely coarse face, and it looked brutal and repulsive. A close observer would have said that the face was evil, treacherous and sinister. His garments were coarse, and, though scrupulously clean, ill-fitting and unbecoming, and, taken all in all, the man was not a prepossessing figure.

He was hurrying toward the hut when he suddenly caught sight of the traveler's horse. He halted, looked at the horse and the hut, by turns, and then applied his fingers to his hard scalp, as though to quicken his thoughts.

"Thar is somebody in the hut," he muttered. "Who is he?—friend or foe? Maybe some stray hunter; his hoss don't look Injun. I'll see!"

Secretly he approached the hut, and soon gained position where he could look into the window and see the interior. The girl and the traveler were there. The spy did not look at the former; all his attention was on the traveler; but the latter's face was turned away. He listened, and the conversation soon revealed the bare facts of the case.

Suddenly the traveler turned his head, and his face became visible to the man at the window.

The spy started. Surprise, doubt, eager curiosity, and, once more, surprise, were in turn expressed on his face. He shrunk back a little, and muttered words fell from his lips:

"Dick Prior, by blazes! Who'd 'a' thought it? Now, what sent him hyar? He's the last man I'd 'a' thought o' seein'. Ha! this is rich luck, an' I'm glad it's so; I'll hev some fun with him, an' thar ain't much danger that he'll know me. But—wait! What ef he has found me out, an' come hyar ter see me?"

A troubled expression crossed the spy's face, and he half-raised his rifle. Then he lowered it again.

"No hurry," he added. "It may be all chance, an' ef it is, I ain't goin' ter kick up no row; I'll talk him fair an' squar', an' lay low. But ef I find he's hyar as my enemy, come ter dig up any o' the old accounts, an' enter either o' my old games, then look out fur yerself, Dick Prior!"

His hand strayed to the trigger of his rifle; then, throwing the weapon carelessly across his arm, he entered the hut.

The traveler arose at his entrance, while the girl hastened to speak.

"Father, this is Mr. Prior, a rover who chanced upon our hut, and stopped to see who lived in such a remote place. Sir," to Prior, "this is my father, Mr. Lefferts."

Prior advanced and extended his hand, which was unhesitatingly taken.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Lefferts," said Prior.

"That's all right, young feller, an' you are welcome ter my palace; but though its gorousness may sorter stagger ye, I want one idee kep' in mind."

The master of the hut was bluff in his manner, but not aggressive or surly.

"What is that?" Prior asked, smiling.

"My gal, hyar—Inez, her name is—introduced me as 'Mister' Lefferts. I'll talk ter her about it later, fur she knows I don't 'low it. I won't be called 'Mister' by nobody! I'm as good as any man, an' won't be slandered. Furdermore, I've got a name o' my own. Stranger, I'm Pete Lefferts, otherwise known as Old Porcupine, the Lost Link from Locust!"

"A singular name."

"Fits me wal; I'm odd. Thar ain't many like me. I'm honest, but I ain't a hypocrite. Most honest folks be. I'm rough, but I'm tender-hearted. I'm a man made as Natur' wants folks made—rough, blunt, plain; no sham, no

show, no spread. Bein' sech a critter, I'm the Lost Link, half-way 'twixt a monkey an' a fool—which last common men is. Bein' the happy medium, I'm the Lost Link. See?"

"It is very clear."

"Of course. Wal, stranger, you're welcome. Set down an' be miser'ble; I like ter be that way myself. How'd ye happen along?"

"I am an aimless rover—a reckless one, perhaps. I am wandering, haphazard, over the West, and it was mere chance that took me to your cabin. It was a surprise, I assure you, when I found a lady here."

"She won't be hyar long."

"No?"

"No. Gal," to Inez, "ef you have any fol-de-rols you value, pack 'em up. We leave hyar at dark."

"Leave here?" the girl echoed, in surprise.

"I said so, didn't I?"

"Why should we leave?"

"Mebbe you want ter lose yer skulp," growled the trapper, irritably.

"Is there danger?"

"Yes."

"I thought you felt sure of the good-will of the Indians."

"The red cusses ain't ter be trusted. Don't argue, gal; I hate ter have folks do so, an' I won't argue. Let it be enough that the signs are bad, an' I scent danger. Ef we don't want ter lose our ha'r we'll move on, so we go at dark. Old Porcupine ain't no fool, an' don't ye think he is. Stranger, we shall be right happy ter have you go 'long with us."

Prior glanced at Inez.

"May I ask where you intend to go, Mr.—"

"Call me Old Porcupine, or simply 'Pete.'"

"As you will."

"Can't say whar we will stop. The red devils are arter us in a way I don't like, an' we must seleck some safe place, wharever it may be. We'd like ter have you along."

The gruff trapper spoke with unusual cordiality, and certainly seemed sincere.

"I think I will do it," Prior answered. "My life is a viewless one, and it will be a pleasant experience to settle down for a few days with you. I will accept your offer with thanks."

"Good!"

Lefferts arose, went to the window, and looked in the direction from whence he had lately come. With careful vigilance he swept the whole visible area with his experienced gaze; and then turned with an air of relief.

Inez was watching him with something more than passing curiosity. She knew the man of old, and felt sure that there was more in the case than he had told. Her heart sunk as she considered what might have happened. He noticed her close study and frowned.

"Make ready fur the trail, gal!" he ordered, harshly.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PROWLING INDIAN.

The mid-day sun was shining upon the prairie, and upon the timber-belt in which was situated Yank Yellowbird's hut. The mountaineer, himself, had been out on a scout, and was now returning with the dog, Moses, at his heels.

Seen by the light of day, the veteran proved to be a man whose years could not fall far short of fifty, though he possessed a face hard to estimate accurately in this particular. It was a good face in every respect—honest, calm, frank, bold and confident, yet modest and mild. Like his manner it seemed, at first sight, to lack all heroic qualities, so far as mere battle-spirit was concerned, but there was something in the calm, quiet gray eyes which indicated that they could grow stern and flashing in time of strife and danger.

He was not a handsome man, for his features were not in harmony. His nose and mouth were too wide; his eyes too small; and his light-hued beard was too thin and erratic to become a model; but, when peace existed, his eyes had a good-humored twinkle, and his mouth a humorous expression, which indicated an even, kindly, peaceful nature.

His garments were well worn, and by far too large for him. His cap, made from the skin of some animal, was exceedingly battered up, and his flaxen-colored hair hung below it in irregular points.

Moses, the dog, may have been actuated by a desire not to look better than his master. Certainly he was not a handsome dog. His huge body, like Yank's, did not accumulate flesh—indeed, Moses was remarkably lank. His head, too, was homely. It was large and heavy, and, though intelligent, had an aggressive and unprepossessing appearance.

Followed by his dog—Moses would have followed him through fire and water; in days of plenty and days of poverty; in sickness, danger and death—Yank re-entered the hut. Border Bullet, Mrs. Prior and Abigail Longstreeter were already there.

"Home ag'in!" quoth the mountaineer, as he set his rifle in one corner. "Thar ain't no place like it, but that don't a'ply ter a free-rover, when the egregious red-skins make him shift his camp ev'ry day. He's a man o' many homes."

"What is the result of your scout, Nevermiss?" asked the young hunter.

"Your idees was confarmed."

"Then you have seen hostile sigus."

"I've seen that which makes me b'lieve 'twill be wal for us ter git out o' hyar ter-night, an' pitch our tent in another locality. By hurley, I hev ter meander about like a convivial parson who goes about ter tell folks what egregious wicked folks their neighbors be."

"I should say," sternly observed Abigail, "that you are not the man to scoff."

"I consait not, Miss Longsteerer, fur—"

"My name, sir, is Longstreeter."

"To be sure—to be sure. So I said. But about scoffin', it wouldn't become me, bein' that I am so afflicted. My left foot, mum, is the condemned coward you ever seen—it's a terrible weak sister—an' I am as ful o' newrolgy as I kin hold. I s'pose thar are other bad aches—I've had all the distempers flesh is heir to, an' suffered like hurley with 'em—but fur re'e'l, atrocious pain I hain't never seen anything so full o' animosity as the newrolgy. I hev an idee ef it could be captered, as 'twere, like a wild hoss, it might be used as a motive power ter draw steam injines—the ache could—but it would be tough on the pocomotive, as some folks call the injine, an' I dunno how the ache could be got out o' me. I tried it once. I went ter St. Louis, an' arter havin' it photergrafted, went ter a hospitile. A spruce young doctor stepped up an' axed me w'ot they could do for me.

"Bleed me, sez I."

"What fur? sez he."

"Ter git red o' an ache, sez I."

"Better hev it pulled, sez he."

"Not much," sez I; "one o' you egregious doctors pulled a tooth fur me with a pair o' parsnips, an' he made more ache than he distracted. Bring on a tub," sez I, "an' we'll start the flow o' blood. Ef it don't dreen off the newrolgy, nothin' will," sez I.

"Wal, they went at me, while I took an egregious big chew o' the weed an' tried ter amuse myself. They cut all my blood-vessels in two, an' was pooty busy fur awhile. I didn't take much notice o' what was going on, fur I was watchin' a spider spin a web in one corner o' the room, but bime-bye one feller sez:

"It's done, sez he."

"Hev ye drawed off the ache? sez I."

"Ain't seen it," sez he."

"Then bleed me ag'in," sez I."

"We've drawed off ev'ry spoonful o' blood in ye," sez he."

"Strain the stuff, an' see ef ye find the ache," sez I.

"Jest then the atrocious newrolgy give me a twist in the right arm, an' my fist flew around an' hit the young doctor in the nose. He fell over on the floor, but hopped up right away, mad as a hatter. I 'pologized, throwing the blame onter the newrolgy, but he wouldn't hear ter me. He an' the other doctors sailed in me, tooth an' nail, an' as I wouldn't submit ter bod'ly injury, I had ter lick the hull crowd like hurley. Then I lit out fur the woods, an' I ain't never doctored fur the distemper sence, but it's a fact that, when I'm wu'st, ef ye keep yer mouth closed an' bark careful, you kin bear me ache. Try it some time, Miss Longsteerer."

The maiden lady had listened to this long history with many a toss of her head, and curl of her lips, and elevation of her nose; all expressive of disbelief and contempt. She now pointed her cane at Yank and exclaimed:

"You've b'en drinkin', you wretch!"

"I didn't touch your flask, mum," meekly replied the mountaineer.

"My flask!" and the lady clasped her hands tragically.

"I reeelly didn't tech it, Miss Longsteerer."

"Oh!" cried Abigail, rolling her eyes upward, "what would my dear sisters o' the Anti-Demon-of-Drink Society say ef they knowed of the cruel slight put upon me? Oh! degenerate days! Oh! sorrowful epoch! Oh! the darkness of Egypt an' the wickedness of Cain! To think that I should be thus put down, an' imposed onter, an' insulted by a MAN! Sir, I would have you know I am an apostle o' the new light o' the Nineteenth Centenary. I am goin' about ter draw folks out o' their sins an' hypocracies. How dare you insult me by speakin' o' my flask—as though I would te'ch the vile fluid abomination!"

And Miss Abigail moved her cane wildly.

"Miss Longsteerer," interrupted Agnes, with severity, "I must protest against such talk from you. You are the aggressor in every case, and if you cannot endure the good-humored remarks of our kind host, you had better remain silent."

"Land o' Goshen! don't say a word," Yank said, good-humoredly. "Miss Longsteerer an' I ain't got no ill-will. She's jokin' when she 'cuses me o' drinkin'—"

"I ain't!" snapped Abigail.

"Then we'll make b'lieve you be," responded the mountaineer, with a bland wave of his hand. "As fur the liquor question, I ain't given ter imbibin', though I do consait the stuff, rightly used, is one o' the best medicines out. None o' the Yellowbirds ever drunke'd ter distress,

fur it always goes ter their knees, an' makes 'em so egregious weak thar that they can't maintain the fam'ly pedigree, nor their balance."

At that moment a small negro boy bounded into the hut, his face the picture of excitement.

"Massa Yank, I's done seen an Injun!" he exclaimed.

The mountaineer's careless expression vanished, and his gray eyes grew bright and keen as he arose.

"Nigh hyar?" he asked, grasping his rifle.

"Jes' over by de dead cottonwood, sah."

"Thar'll be a dead Injun ef he don't look out," quoth Nevermiss, as he hurried from the hut.

The cottonwood was comparatively near the camp, and it was no trifling matter that an Indian had been seen there. Despite the "signs" that had been seen during the past two days, there had been hope that the Sioux had up to that time made no actual discovery, but if one was so near, danger was imminent.

Followed by Border Bullet and the dog, Yank went to the edge of the timber. They at once saw the Indian—a lone warrior who stood under the dead cottonwood in a thoughtful attitude. His side was toward the white men, and his gaze turned elsewhere.

Border Bullet brought his rifle to bear upon the red foe, but Yank caught his arm.

"Don't fire!" the veteran exclaimed.

"Such was not my intention, but the target is tempting."

"An' dangerous, I consait. What be we ter do with the varmint?" he added, after a moment's pause.

"Unless we can get the best of him, Yank," said Border Bullet, pointing to the mysterious Indian, "every member of our party is doomed. Ha! what is he doing now?"

As he spoke the Sioux moved forward a few paces, dropped upon his knees, and disappeared in the tall grass of the prairie. They watched patiently, but ten minutes passed and they saw him no more.

"I've got business over thar!" Yank abruptly exclaimed, pointing to the dead tree.

"Our red friend needs interviewing."

"I consait we understand each other, an' moreover, the feller needs lookin' arter at once. Go back ter the cabin an' see that no red insex skulks up thar, an' I'll see what our meanderin' frien' is doin' now. We can't leave our quarters ontil after dark, fur we should tharby 'tract the attention we want ter avoid; so we want ter keep our hut a sacred place ef we can."

At the last words the mountaineer bent his tall form and moved forward. The grass on the open prairie was high enough to conceal him when he assumed such a position, and he then became screened from view.

Border Bullet retraced his steps and joined Guv'nor.

The latter was a negro boy about fourteen years old. Yank had rescued him from a party of Sioux a year before, and since then, he had shared his benefactor's hut and fortunes. His complexion was not black, but a yellowish brown, and he was honest, grateful, faithful and fairly intelligent.

Guv'nor soon went to the hut, while Border Bullet paced slowly back and forth, watching the timber closely. Had it not been for the females he would have welcomed danger. Of late he had found pleasure in it, though far from reckless by nature. He had had his romance, and not long before, either, and when the light which had fallen on his pathway died out, he had seen but little good left in the world.

Border Bullet was a sensible man, but, like most young people, was apt to fall into a gloomy, morbid vein when trouble fell on his life and refused to be beaten off.

Nearly an hour passed before Yank returned, and when he came, it was from the western end of the timber-belt. His manner was quiet, and he walked without any unusual precautions against danger, but he nodded as he approached the hunter.

"It is all right," he observed.

"Then you saw the Indian?"

"I did, an' a prepossessin' insex he was. He had on more war-paint than a fash'nable belle wears at a ball."

"Did you have an encounter?"

"No. I don't know jest what the varmint was gittin' at, anyhow. He had moved 'round inter the timber by the time I got sight on him, an' seemed ter be mightily int'rested in the state o' the ground, as though he had his eye on a trail. I expected he would head this way, which would have made an arton o' tribulation 'twixt him an' me, but he didn't. He trotted 'round like an egregious dog, an' finally moved off right away from us. I consait it was my duty ter hev stopped his lopin', but, somehow, I don't take nat'rally ter bein' a slayer an' a killer."

"Do you think we are actually discovered?"

"I hardly know, by hurley! I should think that we was being hunted for by them desarters who had our women friens' captive, aided by Storm-Cloud's men, but you seen signs before I got back. Again, that red insex ought ter have diskivered us when he got so nigh, but it may be the Power that watches over us all wa'n't willin'

it should be done. Anyhow, thar ain't a shade o' doubt but we must git away from hyar. I consait thar will be other men in the timber afore midnight."

CHAPTER VII.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

As darkness drew near, Yank made his preparations for departure. There was but little to do; his wordly effects were few and simple, and, whenever he moved, the strong back of his horse was quite capable of carrying the whole.

There was considerable anxiety among the members of the party. Yank and Border Bullet were cool, but wary; danger was too common an occurrence with them to cause any fear; but it was not so with the women. Abigail was so frightened that she was silent most of the time, while Mrs. Prior found ample food for gloomy thought.

The impression had become general that the combined forces of Lieutenant Nolaw and Storm-Cloud were hovering near, searching for the escaped prisoners, and only baffled, thus far, by the precautions Yank had taken to break the trail the previous night.

There was no doubt that the Sioux were on the war-path. They had been restless for some time, and Yank had seen evidence of their disposition to make mischief, and the latest developments not only settled their intentions, but showed that the little party in the timber-belt were in great danger. They had to fear both Storm-Cloud and Lieutenant Nolaw, and the latter had sunk to the level of a mere outlaw.

As for the Sioux chief, he was Yank's bitter personal foe. On several occasions the mountaineer had baffled him in his hostile projects, and nothing would please him more than to secure the scalp of the renowned white man.

Little time was allowed to go to waste after dark. The horses were brought to the door; the camp-effects were loaded; the various persons mounted, with the exception of Yank; and then the start was made. Leaving the timber-belt, they went almost due south.

Yank took the lead, and, going on foot, kept several rods in advance. He had explained his views to Border Bullet, and the latter was fully capable of conducting the party. The mountaineer, therefore, was able to give all his attention to the work he had taken upon himself—to see if the way was clear. He did not expect to get through without adventure by the way; everything went to show that the enemy were seeking them, and the soldier outcasts were not likely to submit quietly to the loss of their captives.

The night was favorable for the journey. Dark, heavy clouds curtained the sky, and it would require keen eyes to detect their movements at any great distance.

Yank moved away with as much composure as though no danger was near. To him there was always a deep charm in the varied scenes of Nature's abode; the prairies, mountains, rivers and woods had a voice which spoke an audible language and found an echo in his heart; and even on this occasion he seemed to be lifted above the common things of life as his feet pressed the turf, and the silence of the prairie closed around him. Yet, no one could be more alert. His wonderfully keen eyes swept the whole area open to his gaze with never-ceasing vigilance, and it would have been a trifling circumstance that could escape his observation.

A mile from the hut they reached a river; the same which Nevermiss had used the previous night to break their trail. He now intended to put it to the same use again. The water of the stream was so dark that, unlike clearer waters, the foot of a horse would leave no betraying outline of a footprint in sand or mud, and his proposed route would deceive pursuers.

The river flowed southwest. Since leaving the hut the party had gone due south. They now intended to ride up the river, which would take them back near the camp. Such a move would hardly be expected by pursuers, especially as every rod the fugitives went would take them so much nearer to the hills where Storm-Cloud's band of red marauders made their home.

It was by this bold step that Yank hoped to deceive the pursuers.

The ride up the river was begun. The mountaineer had mounted, but he kept well in advance of the others, and never relaxed his vigilant watch over the banks. The bed of the river was highly favorable to the present mode of locomotion, and as they could keep in shallow water, the horses had no great inconvenience.

The line of the deserted hut was reached and passed, and another mile soon added to the distance covered. They then reached a rougher region, where the river flowed between low, wooded bluffs. The further they went the wilder would the country become. They were at the outskirts of the Black Hills, and the wonders of that region were many.

Yank Yellowbird suddenly reined in his horse and sat perfectly still as the others came up.

"Is there danger?" Border Bullet asked.

"Look at the tree on the left bank," Yank directed.

The hunter obeyed.

"A fire!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Somebody has built a blaze nigh the river—nigh enough so the light falls on the leaves o' the trees faintly. It may be a white man's camp; it may be reds. Ef the last, thar may be a sentinel on the bluff, I consait it ain't wise ter pass hap-hazard. I want the rest on ye ter ride clos' up ter the bank, an' stay thar as mute as mice while I rek'norter an artom."

"Can't we ride around?" asked Agnes, nervously.

"We don't want ter. We're leavin' no trail, now, an' we want ter keep it up. Don't be afeerd; I consait we shall pull through 'thout any disturbance. Ride this way!"

He indicated the point, and the horses were soon standing close to the bank, half-concealed by the bushes. Yank slipped from his horse, stepped to the bank, and disappeared in the darkness and bushes.

He lost no time, but promptly and quietly ascended the bluff. All his skill was put into use, and no sound betrayed his movements. The highest point was soon reached. He soon satisfied himself that no guard was posted on the bluff, and then he gave his attention to the camp-fire. It was only fifty yards away, and, though in a wood, he soon gained the desired view. The result did not surprise him. A large fire burned in a small depression, and many men were around it—how many, he could not tell, but at least fifty.

Of these the majority were Sioux in war-paint, while the rest were white men who wore the uniforms of the United States soldiers. It was not hard to surmise who and what they were, but the mountaineer was destined to have better evidence. Two men left the camp-fire and advanced toward the bluff. Yank crouched lower, and quietly waited.

They walked to the extremity of the level land and stood looking out over the western prairie. One was a muscular Indian, whom Yank at once recognized as Storm-Cloud. The second was one of the soldiers.

"It's confounded queer that we don't get any news," said the latter, irritably.

"Let my brother be patient," answered Storm-Cloud. "It is no easy thing to search the many hiding places that these hills and the prairie afford. The crow would grow weary in flying across the land of the Sioux, and a few pale-faces can hide in a small place. Besides," the chief slowly added, "it is not easy to trap the man your people call Yank Yellowbird."

"I am tired of hearing of that fellow!" the man in blue sharply returned.

"Shall we leave him alone, Black Fox?"

"No, no; of course not. I want the woman he stole from me. The old Jezebel is of no use, except as a cook, but the younger one is a treasure."

"My brother is not all warrior."

"How so?"

"His heart is warm when he sees a fair-faced woman."

"Nonsense! I am not in love with Agnes Prior—a divorced woman. Bah! You don't know how we look at this matter, chief, but I don't want the woman as a wife. I suppose you understand that. She has played her part in a little romance, and if I could find a man named Reginald Eyre, and he could find Dick Prior, ex-husband of the fair Agnes, there would be fun for the elect. But don't talk of love; I want none of it. Bear in mind that I am Lieutenant Nolaw, outcast, renegade, hunted traitor, warrior, and foe of the white man!"

"The speaker uttered these words with vindictive emphasis.

"Black Fox is his own master," the Sioux gravely replied.

"But about our fugitives. You have thirty men out scouting. It's queer some of them don't bring in evidence."

"Yank Yellowbird leads the pale-faces, and he is cunning as a serpent. Many a time has he slipped through my fingers before. The red-men call him Nevermiss, and there are those who say he bears a charmed life."

"Hang the fellow! if ever I get my hands on him, I'll wring his neck!" Nolaw exclaimed.

Yank smiled grimly.

"Be patient, brother. I have sworn that Nevermiss shall die, and Storm-Cloud breaks not his word. The tall white man has been the dreaded foe of my race, and there will be great rejoicing when his scalp dangles at this belt."

The Sioux's hand fell to his waist, as though he already felt the aforesaid scalp there, but the mountaineer indulged in a quiet laugh. He had heard such threats before, and had been hunted by the Sioux scores of times, but his shrewdness had enabled him to baffle all their schemes.

In the meanwhile Border Bullet and his companions waited by the bank. Their position was such that they neither saw nor heard the two men on the bluff, and they had no means of knowing what was transpiring. Once they heard a sound which seemed like the call of a night-bird, but it made Border Bullet start. It was twice repeated, and the young man scanned the bluff with additional keenness.

Natural as the sound was, it seemed to him

remarkably like an imitation of the night-bird. He would not have noticed it, however, had he not often heard Yank imitate the same feathered sky-traveler.

The delay was growing suggestive of trouble when the mountaineer appeared as noiselessly as he had gone.

"It's all right," he said, cheerfully, but in a low voice. "We will go on ag'in, but I want you all ter step soft as a bumblebee, an' not that, neither, fur you ain't doin' the steppin'—tis the hoses—but don't talk. Thar is men on the bank above, but I consait we'll git away all right. The Yellowbirds are noted fur slippin' out o' egregious scrapes. Come on, an' don't say a word!"

The veteran's voice was unusually earnest, and he carefully regained the saddle.

"Hello! whar's Guv'nor?" he added.

Border Bullet turned. He had supposed that the negro boy was just behind him, but there stood his horse with a vacant saddle. Before any one could comment further on the fact Guv'nor suddenly appeared from the bushes and agilely scrambled back to his place.

Yank bestowed a sharp glance upon him, but started his horse without further words. A period of painful suspense followed. The light of the camp-fire seemed to fall more strongly than ever on the tree-tops above, and the splashing of the horses' feet troubled Yank more than he would have admitted. His gaze was never at rest; it flashed here and there, scanning every point of the eastern bluff; and his rifle was held ready for use. There was, luckily, no occasion for a shot; the little party went on safely, and the dangerous locality was soon left behind.

Not until they had gone half a mile did the guide throw off his acutely watchful manner. Then it gave place to one of manifest relief.

"I consait we're pooty nigh safe, now," he observed.

"It was like running the gantlet."

"To be sure. The egregious insex was closer to the stream."

"Was it—"

Agnes Prior spoke thus far, and then hesitated.

"It was Lieutenant Nolaw an' Storm-Cloud. You may as wal know the truth. They're there, but, land o' Goshen! they ain't got us yet, an' I don't mean they shall."

"Massa Yank," interrupted Guv'nor, "did you talk wi' the Shoo chief?"

The mountaineer started.

"Did I? Not much, I didn't."

"Seen you talkin' wi' some Injun," persisted the boy.

"Seen me! Land o' Goshen! what's the matter with ye, youngster? Could you see through that bank o' arth? I consait not. Don't be foolish."

"I went up der bank, an' I seen you talkin' wi' an Injun. Ef he wa'n't a Shoo, w'at was he?"

"None o' yer jokes hyar, Guv'nor."

"Dis yar chile ain't jokin'. You an' der Shoo stood togedder in a frien'ly way, an' talked fast, but I didn't hear w'at ye said."

"That'll do, my colored frien'. Don't let me hear another word from ye. 'Tain't fit an' proper fur boys ter do so much talkin', anyhow; a boy who puts hisself onter a level with growed folks, an' talks like a parrot, is a nuisance an' an abomination. Sech a boy in the bands o' my ancestor, Adam Yellowbird, would git thrashed like hurley. Ag'in, Guv'nor, ef you go 'round with me, I want you ter hev some regard fur truth an' voracity. One liar in a fam'ly will do more damage than an epidemic o' measles, or a congregation o' fire. Bear this in mind, Guv'nor, an' don't see anything arter this that ain't visible ter other eyes. Ef ye do, I'll take ye ter a hospitile an' hev yer eyes operated on fur deefeks. I've seen sech things done, Border Bullet, when the patient had an eye-trouble, which, I b'lieve, is called a catamount."

"Cataract, I think, you mean."

"Possibly—possibly. It's an egregious bad complaint, anyhow, an' is brought on by boys talkin' too much. Now, forward all, and no more words."

Yank talked with unusual rapidity, and showed considerable annoyance. His voice had not grown hard, but he clearly intended that Guv'nor should say no more. And the boy realized this and was silent. Border Bullet, however, fell into thought. He remembered the cry of the night-bird, and wondered if there had been any foundation for the boy's statement.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING MEETING.

THE sun was nearing the zenith. Another day had dawned, and the cloudy sky of the previous night had given place to one clear and blue. Old Sol poured down his rays upon the hills and prairies of Sioux-land as though in a benevolent mood.

Agnes Prior emerged from a gulch and sat down in a beautiful little grove. She had left the hut which Yank and Border Bullet had already erected at the new camp, and wandered away. She felt a desire to be alone, for she was in a frame of mind far from buoyant. Hers

had been a checkered life. True, it had been nearly all sunshine in her girlhood, but the time had come when, in her opinion, death would have been better than what she had endured. Recent events had made those bitter days more vivid, and new lines were appearing on her worn face.

She sat down under a tree and gave herself up to thought. Half an hour passed, and then the sound of footsteps caused her to suddenly raise her head. Border Bullet and Yank had gone out to look at the surrounding country, and she hoped one of them was returning, but feared that it might prove a foe.

Nearer came the footsteps, and then a man parted the bushes and stepped into view not twenty feet away. It was neither Yank nor the young hunter, and Agnes rose quickly. The new-comer paused, and then he and she stood face to face.

Strange and startling meeting! The color receded from her face in a rush, leaving it pale as marble, and gazing at him with dilated eyes, she caught at a branch of the tree and clung to it as though she would otherwise have fallen.

And he? It was the chance guest of Old Porcupine, who stood there—Richard Prior. And in the heart of the Sioux country he met the woman from whom he had parted years before, literally when the decree of divorce parted them lawfully. Never again had he expected, or wished, to look upon her, but in the place and the hour when he least expected it, they had met.

The surprise did not fall lightly on him. He, too, grew very pale, and the hand which held his rifle shook like a leaf. He stood transfixed, gazing blankly at the white-faced woman before him; the woman who had been his wife until, seeing his honor and his claims to manhood menaced, he had applied for the divorce and cast her out of his life.

He was the first to recover. Time did not seem to give back strength or animation to her, but over his face there crept a hard, bitter smile—or what was the mockery of a smile.

He bowed with ironical politeness.

"Good-morning, madam," he said, in an icy tone. "This is an unexpected meeting, so I hope my delay in greeting will be pardoned. I was not aware that you were residing at this fashionable resort."

She put out one hand, feebly, humbly.

"Richard!" she gasped.

"Madam?"

"I did not know—I did not think—"

He bowed coldly.

"Pray proceed!" he returned, with a wave of his hand.

"I did not know you were here, or—or I would not have come," Agnes faltered.

It was a pitifully humble apology, but Richard Prior saw only its incongruous aspect.

"Not being the owner of this Sioux Garden of Eden, I have no right to complain," he returned. "This region is free to all, I dare say, if they see fit to risk their scalps here. It seems rather odd that you—or any other white woman—should be here, though. Possibly, however, you are missionary to the Sioux. You were always fond of doing good."

His irony cut her like a dagger-thrust.

"Forbear!" she tremulously answered.

"As you will."

He paused and looked at her with visible curiosity. His resentment prompted him to move away at once, and banish her face from his sight, but his great wonder that she should be there, so far from the nearest settlement, urged him on to learn more. He hesitated, desirous of questioning her, but hating himself for allowing any curiosity in regard to her to find place in his mind. He noticed that her apparel, which he had never seen otherwise than neat in the bygone days, was now rent and soiled, and could not help connecting the fact with the known hostility of the Sioux.

And it was thus that he had met his wife of former days!

It was she who broke the silence that was beginning to grow awkward—it could not be otherwise than painful.

"I hope you are well and happy, Richard," she said, still humbly.

"I am well!" he pointedly replied.

"I thought you had gone East."

"I have been everywhere," he answered, sharply.

"Perhaps—that is—I hope you do not think more bitterly of me—you may have heard something since then."

Incoherent as the words might have been to a stranger, as they fell tremulously from her lips, they were plain enough to him. A scornful smile crossed his face.

"Nothing!" he tersely returned. "I heard enough in the old days to fill my desires forever."

Her head drooped, but at that moment footsteps were again heard, and Yank and Border Bullet came into sight almost as suddenly as Prior had done a few moments before. Both paused at sight of him, while he shot a defiant glance at them. Yank he did not know, and cared nothing about, but he noticed that Bor-

der Bullet was young and far from ill-looking.

The mountaineer looked at Prior; then at Agnes; and then back to Prior. Their faces and their attitudes told a good deal to the keen-eyed veteran, and he had more than that upon which to base his ideas. It will be remembered that in the conversation he overheard between Storm-Cloud and Lieutenant Nolaw, the latter had spoken of Agnes; had said that she was a divorced woman and had spoken of "Dick Prior," her "ex-husband," while to this Yank had added some late news that helped him along.

He advanced toward the stranger.

"How d'ye do, mister? Fine mornin', I consait. I'm sorter surprised ter see ye, an' not so very much surprised, either, fur I was lookin' for ye. I dunno as that's so, either, for I don't know who ye be."

"My name," coldly answered the younger man, "is Richard Prior."

"Thought so."

"May I ask by what act of magic you arrived at the conclusion?" asked Prior, looking at Agnes as though he suspected a plot.

"Tbar wa'n't any magic about it, fur I ain't no saucer. You see, Border Bullet, hyar, an' I went out fur a scout, an' we found the camp o' the queer critter who calls hisself Old Porcupine, the Lost Link from Locust—though why any sane man wants ter lug around sech an egregiously absurd handle I dunno. His daughter, Inez, was thar, too. Pooty as a pictur', ain't she? She is, by hurley! Wal, it come ter pass that Border Bullet knowed Leg-it an' his—"

"Lefferts," interrupted Border Bullet.

"Didn't I say so? Slip o' the tongue, then. Yes, he knew them, fur he met 'em som'ers last summer. Wal, Leg-it was as short an' crusty as a cowcumber, but when he said the atrocious Sioux was arter your party, too, I felt pity for the pooty gal, an' asked them ter jine our party. An' they tol' me they had a partner named Richard Prior, an' when I seen you I consaited you was the man. I usually recognize a man, owin' ter a faculty fur keepin' faces in reck'lection, ef I ain't never seen him afore."

The mountaineer talked rapidly and easily, but his gaze was not at rest. He stole frequent glances at Agnes, while talking to Richard, and what he saw confirmed all his suspicions. Agnes was Prior's divorced wife, and the quarrel between them was as bitter as ever.

Richard's face had grown hard.

"Am I to understand that you and Lefferts propose to unite your parties?"

"Jes' so."

"And your party—you don't belong to the band of Sioux!"

There was a transient gleam of resentment in Yank's gray eyes; the deliberate insult, for it was no less, could not be overlooked. He knew what was intended, but his irritation passed quickly. Leaning his tall figure upon his rifle, he composedly replied:

"Mister, I don't."

"Then who compose said party?"

"Yonder lady, another lady, a boy o' brunet complexion, Border Bullet an' myself."

"Such being the case," observed Prior, "I think that you will be able to take care of one another, being so many in number, without my aid, and I will withdraw from the party."

"An' jine the Sioux?" coolly asked Yank.

"Sir?"

"Wal?"

"Do you wish to insult me?"

"In what way have I did so?"

"By intimating that I would join the blood-thirsty Sioux."

"Mister," the mountaineer replied, "you hev the most egregious short mem'ry o' any man I ever seen—you hev, by hurley! It wa'n't a minute ago that you hinted that I b'longed ter the atrocious red insex, an' now you flash up like a prairie on fire 'cause I return yer own words. I did it charitable-like, though; when a man talks mean ter me I don't want anything o' his, as gift or loan."

Richard Prior's face had flushed.

"Sir," he said, quickly, "I owe you an apology, and I make it plainly. I was ill-tempered and hasty, and I beg your pardon. Furthermore, I shall be glad to stay with you, and the united party, if there is really danger. I met Lefferts and his daughter by chance, but I told him, when he announced that there was danger, that I would keep him company for awhile. I felt it my duty, for his daughter's sake. Woman, good or bad, has claims upon strong-armed men. For this reason, sir, I will gladly stay with you, if you can overlook my intemperate words."

Prior was wholly sincere: he meant exactly what he said; but the words "good or bad" had been introduced parenthetically for the special benefit of his wife.

He disliked very much to join the party; he felt that life in her company even for a short time would be almost unendurable; but, being just in other ways, whether he was to her or not, he felt that honor and humanity imperatively required him to give his aid to the imperiled women in their hour of adversity. Despite this, he wanted her to know that he was not kept there by the magnetism of her presence, and he

tried to convey the idea so that she, alone, would understand.

There must be no renewal of the old confidence or love.

CHAPTER IX.

ANTAGONISTIC ELEMENTS.

YANK YELLOWBIRD answered with perfect good humor.

"Land o' Goshen, stranger, I don't bear ye no will. I take it that I kin ginerally tell the diff'rence betwixt the sharp words that come from unthinkin' temper, and them that spring from a really vicious mind. Go along with me, lad; I shall be glad ter have ye. I'm ginerally of a sociable turn o' mind, though thar are times that I ain't feelin' that way. An Injun or a b'ar I don't like ter be intimate with. The Yellowbirds all has their pecculiarities. My first ancester, Adam, husband o' Eve Smith, was seleck an' reserved, an' the fam'ly pedigree states that he wouldn't 'low nobcdy in the Garden o' Eden onless he wore a swaller-tailed coat an' a stove-pipe hat."

The mountaineer paused, directed his gaze to the hunter, and, shaking his forefinger at him gravely, added:

"Ef thar was any sech planktitious etiquette hyar, Border Bullet, I consait the poperlation would be skeerce, but what the lords o' *this* side don't want other folks ter wear is their skulps. I mean ter wear mine, though; all the Yellowbirds hev, thus fur; an' I ain't goin' back on the fam'ly custom, by hurley!"

"Excuse me," said Prior, hastily, "but may I ask your name, sir?"

"To be sure. It's Yank Yellowbird."

"By my life, this is news, indeed!" cried Prior. "Little did I imagine to whom I was talking. Sir, I have heard your name at every settlement and camp-fire along the border, and I shall be very glad to serve with you as leader."

"All right, stranger; all you hev ter do is ter fall inter line an' come with me. Le's go to camp now. Leg-it, or whatever you call Old Porcupine, is on the way with his pooty da'rter. We'll hev quite a sociable, an' our force will be sizable. Border Bullet, ef you'll 'scort Agnes, I'll walk on ahead with our new frien'."

The mountaineer had been stroking his beard in an uncertain way, but he now started off briskly. He was not at all sure that the united party would be as barmonious as it would be large. With his usual acumen he had divined the state of affairs between Prior and Agnes, and there were other complications.

When he and Border Bullet had come suddenly upon Old Porcupine and Inez, it had proved that the young hunter was acquainted with both, but not one of the three had offered a friendly hand. Lefferts had shown marked coldness toward Border Bullet, and the latter and Inez had wasted few words on each other.

Yank's new hut had not been built in a place such as he would have selected if alone. It was in a wide gulch, and under a cliff, the top of which leaned forward at a considerable angle. The gulch was covered with abundant grazing for the horses, the grass being plentiful and tender. Groups of bushes and small trees, too, were scattered here and there.

When they arrived at the hut they found Abigail Longstreeter delivering a temperance lecture to Guv'nor, but when she saw the stranger she stopped short, adjusted her spectacles and looked at him long and hard. Possibly she wished to make sure that he was not an Indian.

It was but a few minutes later when Pete Lefferts and Inez arrived. Like Yank and his party, they, accompanied by Prior, had made a night-flight, during all of which Pete's singular uneasiness lasted. Naturally bold to recklessness, he had been still further inured to the hardships of the frontier by long experience, but he had manifested actual though unspoken fear that night.

Inez, to whom this mood was new, was greatly puzzled, but the rough borderer had nearly regained his serenity of mind. He surveyed the camp with manifest approval.

"Wal, now, this is somethin' like; reg'lar palace, ain't it? Garden o' Eden, outside, an' fortifications flung up ter order. I like it! I'm a plain, blunt man, an' I like plain things. I'd ruther eat a grizzly b'ar than a silk gown. Hoop-tedoodle! hyar we be in our castle, with beauty all around us. They dazzle me!"

He shut one eye and looked at Miss Longstreeter, and then his gaze wandered to other scenes.

"I do b'lieve the man has b'en drinkin'" declared Abigail, addressing Mrs. Prior in a tragic whisper.

Old Porcupine's gaze flashed upon her angrily.

"What's that?" he cried. "Who says—"

He stopped short. For the first time his gaze had rested squarely upon Agnes, and the effect was remarkable. The sentence died away on his lips; his bristly under-jaw fell; his face assumed a blank expression; and he stared at her with eyes unnaturally expanded. Boundless surprise, and, Border Bullet thought, dismay were depicted on his face, and, coming at such a moment, his agitation was noticed by all. He suddenly

became aware that he was the focus of wondering gazes, and he broke into a hoarse laugh.

"Hello! what in hurley is the matter?" Yank asked.

"Hey! What's that? Yes, by thunder, we've got a big party, an' I reckon no cowardly reds can't lay us out. Ef they try it, we've got the means o' makin' 'em sorry. You're right, old hoss!"

The Lost Link shrugged his shoulders and jammed his old cap ferociously down over one eye, and tried to appear at his ease. It was not a marked success. No one had said anything to which his erratic remarks could be considered a reply, and he deceived no one. It was plain that he had recognized Agnes, and been not a little shaken by the encounter, but her own expression was surprise.

If she recognized Lefferts, she cleverly disguised the fact.

"Another egregious mystery!" thought Yank, but he kept his impression to himself, and placidly replied: "To be sure, to be sure. Your views are kerreck, an' clear as a bell; an' not so much clear as outspoken. I consait you understand it all."

"I do, thank ye," Old Porcupine answered. "I'm honest, but I ain't a hypocrite."

"Jes' so, jes' so. Anybody kin see that with half an eye, ef the eye is o' the right kind. Wal, hyar we all be, an' it only remains fur you ter talk an' git better acquainted. I consait we shall all know each other better when we git more familiar. An' now a word fur you which I want you all ter understand."

The mountaineer spoke with unusual earnestness, and, pointing his index finger at them in a general way, added:

"I don't want too much wanderin' about. Thar ain't no use o' disguisin' the fack. that we are in some consider'ble danger. A hundred or more Sioux, an' twenty atrocious outlaw soldiers, led by sech men as Storm-Cloud an' the varmint who calls hisself Nolaw, kin do a heap o' mischief; ef we don't look out, we'll lose our skulps—we will, by hurley!—an' the only way ter save 'em is ter be wily as serpents. Stick ter camp; the eyes o' the Sioux are egregious sharp. Our siteration reminds me o' the time my ancestor, Moses Yellowbird, took the children o' Israel through the wilderness.

"Israel, I consait it, must a' b'en a Mormon. Anyhow, he had a 'hull swarm o' children, ef our fam'ly pedigree has the facks correck. Thar was an Injun outbreak that year, an' Israel was 'larmed about his fam'ly. He was busy plantin' corn an' pertaters, so he hired Moses ter guide him ter the settlements, givin' him a rifle, sev'ral traps an' a beaver-skin ter do the job. Moses was a Yellowbird clean through, an' he did what he set out ter do, though they was in the wilderness forty days, I b'lieve, an' had a heap o' triberlation, owin' ter distempers o' various kinds among the children.

"Curiously enough, a distemper saved the 'hull lot at one time, which was when the children o' Israel was down with the whoopin'-cough. 'Bout four hundred Injuns had surrounded 'em, an' arter sharpenin' up their knives on their boot-legs, right in sight o' the children, they begun ter close in ter finish 'em off. The children was so skeered it started the distemper afresh, an' they all began ter whoop so like hurley, that the Injuns thought reinforcements had come, an' they run so fast that some on 'em shook their boots right off an' left 'em by the trail. Nex' day the fugitives 'rived at the Red Sea, whar Moses put the children on ter a ferry-boat, an' then went back ter help Israel hoe his corn."

Yank told this veracious story with benevolent gravity, and a show of perfect faith in the Yellowbird chronicles, but his mind was by no means all on one subject.

He was wondering whether the antagonistic elements in his party would consent to bury their feuds for awhile, and it did not look favorable. While he had been speaking Richard Prior had kept well away from Agnes; Border Bullet had made no attempt to speak to Inez, though Yank considered her charms irresistible; Lefferts stole frequent, uneasy glances at Mrs. Prior which he tried in vain to make secret; while the fact that Prior answered a chance remark of Border Bullet's curtly, led Yank to believe that Richard suspected the hunter of being a favorite with Agnes, and hated him for it.

Truly, this party, disturbed as they were by distrust, dislike and complicated feuds, was not one easy to handle, and harmony was something urgently to be desired.

The mountaineer turned slowly to Border Bullet.

"I'd like your company, neighbor, while I look about a bit. I consait our frien's hyar kin git along, an' I a'p'int Miss Longstriker ter do duty as hostess while we're gone."

Abigail planted her hands on her hips, thrust out her elbows and looked aggressively at the mountaineer through her spectacles. She did not see the intended pleasantries, but she had opinions of her own.

"Sir," she severely replied, "I refuse to accept any position of honor or emolument until thar is a change made hyar. I object ter the

drinkin's an' carousin's; I object ter havin' men in a state of beastly intoxication; I object ter havin' men think they can saturate themselves in rum an' keep ME ignorant. There is men here who has b'en drinkin', an' I know it!"

She looked at the objects of her suspicions with a terrible glare, and then eloquently added:

"Oh! the sinfulness o' man! Oh! the depravity o' the generation! Oh! the horrors o' drunkenness, an' the barbarity o' the male sect! Oh! the uprootin' o' arcadian society, an' the massacre o' innocence! Oh! oh!"

"Oh! oh!" echoed Yank, shaking his head soberly. "It's awful, Miss Longnecker; it is, by hurley! You p'int out the animosity o' the case with tellin' vigor. Boys, I want ye ter keep away from taverns an' distilleries arter this. We can't hev whisky runnin' around hyar like a Missouri river. Ef ye do, the Canterbury-Drink-Demon Society will be arter ye, by mighty!"

The mountaineer winked to Richard Prior, a humorous smile upon his lips, and then turned and abruptly left the camp, followed by Border Bullet.

Inez and Agnes began to converse; Old Porcupine approached Guv'nor and made a wholly unsuccessful attempt to get points from him; while Prior began to pace back and forth in front of the hut. All his thoughts were of the woman into whose society fate had strangely thrown him again, but not a gentle feeling entered his mind.

CHAPTER X.

BORDER BULLET'S STORY.

FEW words passed between Yank and Border Bullet as they walked away from the hut. The mountaineer's mind was not at ease. He knew better than any one else that great danger menaced his little band. Storm-Cloud had abandoned all other schemes to pursue them, and the chief was not only shrewd, but he had a hundred experienced warriors at his back. Every effort would be put forth to accomplish their object, and their success meant death and ruin to the fugitives.

Add to this the fact that scarcely any two of the fugitives were on good terms, and it will be seen that the situation was serious. There is no greater foe to success than internal dissensions.

The new camp was in a place wildly beautiful. Nearly everywhere the surrounding country was hilly and broken. Rocks of every form, from the smallest of boulders to high cliffs, were mixed with a wide variety of timber, gulches, small valleys, and all the heterogeneous novelties of such a region. Toward the west, a wide prairie was but two miles distant, but the rough country extended far east, for they were at the border of the Black Hills.

A hundred yards west of the camp was a lake. It was a mile long, and, possibly, three-quarters of a mile wide. In places the shore was low, but, as a rule, it was in the form of bluffs or cliffs; the latter being two hundred feet high at one point. Three islands, all of which were wooded, were situated near the center of the lake. Of these, the largest contained about five acres; the next in size, one acre; while the smallest was about thirty yards square.

The mountaineer had intentionally located near this lake, as he saw possibilities about it which might have escaped the eye of a novice. He intended to have a way of retreat by water, if necessary, and knew where to find canoes.

Accompanied by Border Bullet, he came out upon the bluff which fronted the lake, and came to a halt under a tree which partially concealed them.

"My good frien'," Yank abruptly began, "what do you think o' our new colony?"

"In what respect?"

"Character."

"I am not quite sure. Richard Prior impresses me favorably, despite the fact that he seems to be of a curt, morose nature. He don't claim to be an experienced plainsman, but his face is bold and intelligent. Has it occurred to you that his name—Prior—is the same as that of Mrs. Prior? Of course it has; and it is also plain that they are old acquaintances. No doubt you noticed that, when we interrupted their interview, both were excited and agitated."

"To be sure. Yes; I've seen all this; an' I think we may safely trust Prior. But what o' Pete Leg-it, an' his pooty da'rt'er?"

Border Bullet's face was averted.

"You will have to judge Lefferts for yourself," he replied.

"That so?"

"You are capable of it, I think, friend Yank."

"Be I as capable as you?"

"Yes, for I don't know whether the man is trustworthy or not."

"Frankness, Border Bullet, is a jewel o' some value."

"Speak plainly, Nevermiss."

"Jest what I want you ter do. We stumbled onter Old Hedgehog, or whatsomever he calls hisself, an' it proved you knew him an' his darter, but how did ye meet 'em? Not with a shake o' the hand, nor frien'ly greetin', nor kind expression o' the face; an' I notice you make no talk now with 'em."

"I have my reason, Yank," the hunter answered, in a low tone.

"No doubt. Now, fur be it from me ter pry inter another man's a'fairs, when he's honest an' lets me alone, but our camp, over yonder, is as full o' myst'ry, grudges an' animonstrosity as a flea is full o' dogs—I mean t'other way, but no matter. I've got ter handle all these cranky critters, an' I consait it's wu'ss than an attack o' the newrolgy. Now, it'd help me amazin' ef you'd tell all yo know about Leg-it an' the pooty gal."

"Your reasoning is convincing, but you ask me to recall scenes I had rather forget. No matter, however; you shall hear the story. It will explain the mood I was in when I joined you ten months ago."

Border Bullet passed his hand slowly, heavily across his contracted brows, like one in pain, but, throwing off the more somber mood, steadily began:

"In the spring of last year I happened to stop at the town of Yellow River, some two hundred miles south of here, I should say. There I met Peter Lefferts and his daughter. I had secured quarters at the house of a man to whom I had brought a letter of introduction, and as Lefferts and Inez were neighbors and acquaintances, I obtained an introduction to them. You have several times given a very bigh opinion of Inez, so you can imagine how she impressed me."

"I can, by hurley! She's as pooty as a peach."

"She and her father were new-comers at Yellow River, having been there only a month or so, so nobody knew much about them. My impression being favorable, I sought Inez's company a good deal. Lefferts, I saw but little, as he was away most of the time. He claimed to be so accustomed to wild life that the restrictions of the town irritated him, and he preferred to pass his time in the woods.

"I may as well say, at once, that this man is a riddle to me. His nature is peculiar. He unites a high temper—which gained for him his sobriquet of Old Porcupine—with a grim fancy which approaches an appreciation of humor, if not its expression. He will lose his temper and abuse some person or thing, and then, recovering his good humor, show actual pride because he was so violent, just before. He is secret and sly, but to save my life, I can't decide whether he is a rascal or an honest man."

"Only a desire to be just enables me to say this, for, if I consulted my prejudices, and appearances, I should say that both he and his daughter were utterly unscrupulous. But to continue:

"Inez and I grew more and more intimate, and—you can surmise the result, friend Yank. I finally asked her to become my wife, and—was refused. Don't ask me for details, but I will say in few words that she had encouraged me; and, until that unfortunate evening, I had felt sure that her affections were mine; yet I was coldly, deliberately rejected, and her tokens of regard left unexplained. Enough on this subject; a man don't like to lay his heart bare at any time, and when he feels as bitter as I do, words are weak.

"The morning following this occurrence, I was arrested. Ah! you start, Nevermiss, but I have told the truth. A business house had been robbed; a knife belonging to me was found in the place, and on this evidence I was arrested as the robber. The jail held me less than a day, for I could prove a complete *alibi*. When I left Inez I craved excitement, and going to a mill owned by a man who was running the place night and day to get off a job of work, I labored all night by his side. You may not call this excitement, but I was a skillful workmen; the occupation had a certain fascination, as it was intricate; it was about the only excitement the town could furnish, and I thus secured company.

"This proved my *alibi*, but what of Lefferts and Inez? They had disappeared during the night, and Yellow River saw them no more. Suspicion turned upon them and they were searched for, but never found. At that time, though I held my peace, I felt sure they were the robbers. How did my knife happen to be in the store? I did not remember seeing it, positively, since the morning before the robbery, yet I was quite confident that it had been in my belt during the interview with Inez; and I leaped to the conclusion that she had deliberately robbed me of it, and that it had been left in the store by her or her father, by accident, or to deliberately connect me with the robbery.

"I never wavered in this belief until, a mon' later, developments in the case seemed to conclusively prove that the robbery was the work of a man known as Bantam Jim, a celebrated thief. The officers were sure Lefferts was innocent and Jim guilty, but up to the time I last heard from there, Jim had not been arrested. Consequently, I don't know who was guilty. The officers said Lefferts was not, but how did my knife get into the place that was robbed?

"To sum it up, I know nothing against Lefferts, and those in authority say he committed no crime against law at Yellow River. I know nothing against Inez, except that she gave me

hopes only to tread them coldly under foot; but, being a man, and having manly spirit, you must excuse me from meeting either one as a friend."

Border Bullet ceased to speak, and it was some moments before the silence was broken.

Yank stood stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"I'm much obliged ter you, lad," he finally said. "I wanted more light, an' I consat it was needed."

"Still more would be welcome."

"To be sure."

Yank removed his battered cap and slowly stirred up his flaxen hair with four bony fingers.

"When I agreed ter take Leg-it in," he added, "I had my doubts. My left foot kep' twitchin', which was a sign the weak sister was skeered, an' Leg-it's face didn't please me. He hadn't that open, frank physiognomy I like, by hurley! but I looked at Inez, an' my heart softened. Leg-it said the Injuns was riz up fur slaughter, an' the gal was in desp'rit danger, an' fur her sake I tried ter swaller my notions ag'in' Old Porcupine; an' so I took 'em in. I hope we won't repent it."

"We can keep an eye on Lefferts."

"Jes' so, an' we will."

"I will try to tone down my antipathy to them as much as possible. Situated as we are, it is the duty of every honorable man in our party to work for the common good."

"Your idees are highly ter yer credit, an' I'm glad you feel so. Out o' all our party you are the only one I kin depend on, an' I need at least one good lieutenant. When a man is bein' chased by egregious Indians, an' has ter stop by the way ter manipulate a human menag'rie, it gives him a heap o' work ter do, by hurley!"

The mountaineer's manner was half-humorous, half-serious, but he suddenly raised his rifle and, throwing it across his left arm, added:

"I reckon I'll go fur a scout. You stay byar, an' not that, either. Look inter camp, an' see how they are."

"I'll do so."

Yank hastened away, and Border Bullet obeyed his last injunction, but, finding all quiet at the hut, returned to the lake-bluff and sat down under the tree. The lake and its surroundings possessed a strong attraction for him, and he felt that, under proper circumstances, he could pass weeks in the vicinity with interest and pleasure.

His roving gaze swept the bold shores of the lake, and it was then that he noticed something peculiar. Far down on the southern side he saw what he at first thought was the flapping of the wing of some huge bird; but further survey banished the idea. It was not a bird's wing, but what was it? Fluttering from the branch of a tree, it might have seemed a flag had it not been wholly unlike one. Possibly it was a blanket hung over a limb—

The object disappeared as Border Bullet looked. One moment it was visible; the next it was gone; and he had no idea what power had removed it. Not being able to believe that it had been any natural object, he continued to watch closely, and, after a little, saw two men appear on a shelf-like ledge which fronted the lake, having come from the bushes beyond.

One was plainly an Indian; the other, unless the hunter's eyes deceived him, was a white man. Border Bullet started, for this appeared ominous, but the impression stole over him that the white man was remarkably like Yank. He could not tell positively at that distance. They remained visible only a short time. The Indian seemed to be speaking; he made frequent, sweeping gestures, or pointed here and there, now out over the lake and, anon, toward the camp; while his companion several times nodded.

Then they disappeared as they had come.

Border Bullet waited in doubt and uncertainty until Yank returned. Then he told plainly what he had seen, and ended by asking if Yank had been the white man on the ledge. Yank manifested surprise; Border Bullet's eyes must have deceived him, he said; but though he seemed to wish to leave the impression that he had denied all, the young man noticed that he did not do so. Seeing that the mountaineer wanted the subject dropped, he humored him, but mentally decided that another mystery was found.

CHAPTER XI.

A MISUNDERSTANDING.

Two days passed without any material change in the situation at the gulch camp. The little party was not molested, and neither the hostile allies nor signs of them were seen. Yank and Border Bullet made such scouting journeys as seemed advisable, but their closest scrutiny did not reveal anything suspicious.

Border Bullet, however, had found food for some thought. The mountaineer's way of disposing of what he had seen down the lake-shore, as related at the close of the previous chapter, had not been satisfactory, and the younger man had investigated. Going to the place where he had seen the two men, he found their footprints. Some of the tracks he could almost swear were

Yank's, while the others were those of an Indian. Locating the tree from which had fluttered the unknown object, he satisfied himself that some one had climbed it; the bark being rough, yet brittle, showed abrasions where the unknown had rubbed against it.

The hunter found where the Indian's trail led away toward the south, and tried to follow it, but was baffled and thrown off the track when he had gone a hundred yards.

This matter puzzled him not a little. If Yank had been talking with an Indian, what was his object? Border Bullet remembered Guv'nor's assertion that he had seen something of the same kind at the bluff. Here was double evidence, yet he found it almost impossible to believe anything of the kind.

Why should Yank Yellowbird hold friendly conversation with an Indian, when all the latter years of his life had been passed in fighting them? He was their enemy: they hated him bitterly; and when they made attack upon him, as they frequently did, he had given them cause to mourn in their villages for rash braves who would go on the war-path no more.

The record of the tall mountaineer saved him from all suspicion of being in league with the Sioux, but Border Bullet could not understand it.

The various differences among the refugees had not been settled. Prior had but twice spoken to his divorced wife, and then, only to say "Good-morning!" in an extremely frigid way. Border Bullet had not taken a course quite so radical. He did not shun Lefferts and Inez, and, at times, talked with them about the situation, but his manner was always cold. Agnes was inclined to be silent and timid, if not frightened, by the presence of Prior; Inez was addicted to long periods of meditation which might mean a good deal; Old Porcupine carefully avoided Agnes; Prior and Border Bullet did not seem to be congenial spirits; and only Yank, Guv'nor and Abigail were able to talk with freedom and ease.

On the morning of the third day, Prior walked to the end of the gulch, and there found Inez looking wishfully toward the vicinity beyond.

"Are you going for a walk?" he carelessly asked.

"I wish I could, but I fear that our leader would not approve of it."

"That depends. It is not safe for you to go alone, and none of us is allowed to go far, but Yank does not object to a ramble near the camp. If you will allow me, I shall be pleased to act as your escort."

It was a chance Inez did not refuse. Her life had been an active, out-door life, and she felt like a prisoner when compelled to stay in the gulch. She did not hesitate, but went at once, and they wandered on from one point to another, but always keeping near the camp. There was much to admire by the way, and time did not drag upon their hands.

Finally they sat down at the foot of a cliff. There was a slope beyond them, and they could look down upon the lake, the waters of which glistened brightly in the sun.

Richard Prior had been a man of books, and he was now surprised to see what knowledge Inez had acquired during her wandering life. She had been dragged here and there all her life, as the erratic fancy of Peter Lefferts led him, but, somehow, she had gained education and book-knowledge, and as intelligence had been her birthright, she was a bright, thoughtful and interesting companion.

She pleased Prior, but he had no thought of her beyond the hour; he told himself that his heart was dead. As for Inez, she did not suspect that Agnes, whom she had come to like, was the divorced wife of her present companion.

Their pleasant interview was rudely interrupted.

A cry suddenly broke from Inez, and she started to her feet. Prior looked around, and then arose as hastily as she had done. He had seen a sight which, startling to an old borderman, was something even worse to one like him, who did not claim to be versed in border lore.

A grizzly bear was almost beside them.

Unknown to them, the animal had his den in a cave in the cliff, the entrance being concealed by bushes, and it had now come out to take part in the interview. Just how it looked at that moment Richard did not have a chance to see; almost at the moment when he made the discovery, the brute uttered a savage growl, and, evidently being of a pugilistic nature, sent out one of its paws straight toward Richard's head.

The latter tried to evade the blow, but was only partially successful. The big paw fell heavily upon his head, and Prior disappeared from the scene as though by magic—but, to him, the impelling power was worse than magic. Just back of where he stood was a thicket, with a sloping bank beyond, and he had been nearly knocked down this bank.

Inez was left alone with the bear.

She was no coward, and, when she had her rifle, had often wandered fearlessly in the mountains, but she now had no weapon but a revolver. Alarmed, yet retaining her presence of mind, she turned to flee.

A moment more, and, just as the bear started

in pursuit, the rocks rung with the report of a rifle, and a clear voice sounded in her ears:

"You can take your time, Miss Lefferts; the danger is past!"

And Border Bullet arose almost beside her. She flashed a backward glance; the bear lay struggling in its death-agony; the danger was, indeed, past.

"A lucky shot," added the hunter, coolly, as he proceeded to load his rifle. "Some idle person bestowed the nick-name 'The Prairie Sharpshooter' upon me, but I am not such a good marksman that I don't give due credit to luck when I drop an animal like yonder fellow at one shot."

Inez had come to a halt. She was breathing hard, but the indifferent air of her companion piqued her, and she made a strong effort to be as calm as he.

"It was a wonderful shot, truly, and I thank you sincerely. I think I should have lost my life only for your bravery."

"Don't mention it—it was nothing."

Border Bullet's air was still nonchalant and indifferent, but his lip curled contemptuously as Richard Prior reappeared.

"Ah!" the Sharpshooter added; "here is your valiant escort, who took to his heels at the first sign of danger, and left you to face the bear alone."

Prior's face had been pale, but it now flushed suddenly.

"What's that, sir?" he demanded.

"Your defense of Miss Lefferts was heroic. She must feel proud of a gallant who is so skillful at running!"

Border Bullet spoke contemptuously, and Richard's face grew white again. He advanced nearer to the speaker, and then paused, his gaze bent upon the hunter in undisguised hostility.

"Possibly I don't yet understand, sir."

"In plain words, only a coward would run away and leave a woman to face danger alone," sharply responded Border Bullet.

"Sir!" exclaimed Inez, indignantly, "you do Mr. Prior great injustice—"

"Wait!" interrupted Richard, in a hard voice. "Let me manage this affair. Mr. Border Bullet—since, for some reason best known to yourself, you see fit to conceal your real name—you have called me a coward. Accusation is one thing; proof is another. You carry a revolver, and so do I. Let us stand at a given distance and fire until one of us falls dead!"

"Ah! a challenge to mortal combat, eh?"

"Yes."

"So you are a fire-eater?"

"I am capable of taking care of my honor."

"Why didn't you think of that before—"

"Before what?" fiercely demanded Prior, as Border Bullet paused.

"You know what lately occurred here."

"I do; I know far better than you think. Fool! you accused me of running away. If you had had one grain of sense, you would have been sure of what you said before you made your charge. In point of fact, the bear knocked me through the bushes as though I had been a tenpin, and I fell, half-stunned, at the bottom of the gulch. If you doubt my word, look!"

Prior put his hand to the side of his head, and took it away stained with blood.

"Done by the grizzly's claws!" he tersely added.

"I can certify that Mr. Prior is right," quickly supplemented Inez. "It was not until he was knocked from the ledge that the bear turned upon me."

"Then I have made a great mistake," promptly admitted Border Bullet. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Prior. You see, I noticed you here one moment, and the next, when I had raised my rifle to my shoulder, you were gone. I drew a wrong conclusion, and I am sorry."

Perfectly cool, he spoke with a frank smile, now, but Richard Prior was not so easily appeased. His blood was hot, and the angry look did not die out of his face in the least.

"That will do for you, but not for me," he stiffly replied. "I now want to know what you were doing here, anyhow. Miss Lefferts and I supposed ourselves alone, but the course of events proved that you were crouching in a thicket, watching us. Pray do you think that, as a spy, you have found your true level?"

Border Bullet flushed slightly; it was particularly irritating to have any one intimate in Inez's presence that he would spy upon her, when they were on such cold terms; but his self-possession did not desert him.

"Now you wrong me, Mr. Prior," he mildly returned. "I don't blame you, for I have, myself, made a serious mistake. You are wholly wrong, though; I was returning to the camp after a scout, and did not suspect that any one was near until I heard Miss Lefferts utter a cry."

The frank explanation would have satisfied a man in his right mind, but the late accusation against him had completely upset Prior. He had magnified Border Bullet's politeness to Agnes into devoted attention, and hated the young man for it. True, he claimed to have interest in his sometime wife no longer, but there was a smoldering fire in his heart which was very much like jealousy.

His eyes now flamed hastily upon the Sharpshooter.

"That sounds very well!" he retorted, "but a man who will make a charge like yours will follow it up with a lie. Mr. Man-with-a-false-name, I demand satisfaction!"

CHAPTER XII. THE CHALLENGE.

THE situation was assuming an ominous aspect, and Inez stood in troubled uncertainty. She looked appealingly at each of the men in turn, and felt herself completely at a loss what to do. She wished to interfere; to act as peace-maker; but there were reasons which made this difficult. She could think of no way in which she could act without adding to the misunderstanding already in force.

Border Bullet still exercised the marked coolness which was a part of his nature.

"Mr. Prior," he courteously added, "I have apologized for my unjust suspicions in regard to you, and I now assure you that you are mistaken in regard to my conduct. Isn't that enough?"

"It is not!" Richard sternly replied.

"Don't you think you are a bit hasty?"

"That is my affair. I have asked you to meet me in a duel and settle this matter. Will you do so?"

The breech of Border Bullet's rifle had been resting on the ground, and his hands were crossed over the muzzle. He now threw his weight more heavily upon it and calmly, steadily met the angry gaze which Prior bent upon him. Briefly he answered:

"No!"

"You will not?"

"I will not!"

"I suppose you have a motive for refusing—"

"I have. How is our little party at present made up? Of three women, and four able-bodied men. And over a hundred blood-thirsty savages are trying to hunt us down. Say what you will; call me any uncomplimentary name you will; but I will not be driven into a quarrel with one of my own party until the women are safe!"

The Sharpshooter spoke in a clear, steady voice, which, without any effort on his part to make it dramatic, was impressive in the extreme, but Prior was deaf to reason.

Drawing a pair of revolvers from his belt, he presented them, butt first, to Border Bullet.

"Choose!" he commanded, in a hard voice.

The words had hardly passed his lips before there was a rustling of the bushes, and some one sprung between them. It was Agnes Prior, pale, startled and trembling.

"No, no!" she cried, wildly, "you shall not!"

Her gaze was upon Richard, and her hands were clasped in an agony of fear. Her slight figure swayed as though her strength was insufficient to support it. Richard stepped back with a mocking bow.

"For your sake, madam, I will spare your lover!" he contemptuously replied.

"My lover!"

"So I said."

"Oh! Richard, Richard!"

"Never mind the heroics; I do not object in the least."

"You wrong me," she gasped.

"Nonsense! You are a free agent, and I, for one, have no desire to direct your preferences."

"Mr. Prior," interrupted Border Bullet, with knitted brow, "there is more to this than is known to me, but I want to say emphatically that you are wholly mistaken. If you have common perspicacity you must see that the lady interfered for you, not me."

"For me!" echoed Richard, scornfully. "Thank you, but I don't crave the honor. It don't belong to me, and I would not have it, anyway. I see no reason why you two should not enlist under Cupid's banner. You will make a charming—and honorable—pair."

"Have mercy, Richard!" implored Agnes, tremulously.

"Have manhood!" added Border Bullet, quickly. "Have manhood and common decency, I should say. Richard Prior, your conduct is that of a barbarian. I have tried to keep my temper, and I say now that I will not have trouble with you while there are helpless women to defend; but when the present danger is over, I am at your service in any way you desire."

"Very well," stiffly replied Prior; "we will fight when the settlements are reached."

"If you desire."

"Ahem!"

The sound came from one side in an emphatic way, and Yank Yellowbird marched up to the group. His rugged, homely face was composed, but the heavy way in which he thumped the breech of his rifle down on the ground bespoke some inward emphasis, if not disturbance. Nobody else seemed to have anything to say then, and, all the mild humor gone from his gray eyes, he looked first at Border Bullet and then at Prior.

"An egregious fine arrangement, by hurley!" quoth the mountaineer, and then he thumped his rifle upon the ground again. "A pooty little fam'ly scheme, I declare! Goin' ter go in-

ter partnership in the butcher business, ain't ye? Aspire ter cut one another up fur buzzard meat, don't ye? Want ter shoot, an' slash, an' perforate, an' carve, do ye? Goin' ter resoom the atrocious practices o' the Dark Ages, ain't ye? Land o' Goshen, you ought ter be in a madhouse—you had, by hurley! an' wrapped up in straight-jackets like a baby in toddlin'-clo'se!"

Nevermiss paused, but no one saw fit to speak. Border Bullet had averted his gaze; Prior's face had flushed; Inez and Agnes looked greatly relieved; while Old Porcupine, who had followed the mountaineer, grinned in humorous appreciation, but did not fail to use his keen little eyes.

And he studied Richard and Agnes closely.

"Ef I had two boys in this party who was serc egregious donkeys as you men be," resumed Nevermiss, "I'd spank them like hurley! I would, by mighty! I knowed a man once who was partial ter ijits, but you would suit him too well. He run an ijitic elysium, but you couldn't git in; he wouldn't have none but sensible ijits, an' I vow you ain't sensible. I wish he's byar now, though, fur he was a master-hand at handlin' weak-minded critters. He give 'em information ev'ry day, an' did it with a strap. Their raiment was allays dusted right on 'em, because they got enough quicker. The patients l'arned ter sing the Psalms o' David in nine diff'rent languages an' dialects, with variations an' irritations."

Pausing once more, the mountaineer leveled his long index finger at Border Bullet.

"Who set you up fur a duelist?" he asked.

"Folly!" tersely replied the hunter.

"Should say so, by hurley! Ain't ye ashamed? Want ter prey on yer fellermen, don't ye? You'd better pray t'other way. Dick Prior, you'd make a fine assassinator, with some considerable practice. You might not do wal at fu'st, but you'd wind up in the graduation-class, which holds its meetins' on the gallows. Murderers are pooty much like college-students. They enter as freshmen; git ter be softymores; jine secret societies, like Flea-better-Hoppers, Alum-water, junkos, quibbles, gangs, an' the like; an' arter takin' a full course they bring up at the graduation-station. The only diff'rence is, the murderers are hung, an' the college-chaps are lawyers an' do it. That ain't jest what I mean, but you understand."

"Yank," interrupted Richard Prior, "I am the man who is most to blame here. I admit that I was wrong."

"Thar's hope fur them who own up."

"I have made contention here, when all our efforts should be directed to a common object—the protection of the females of our party. My hot head led me into trouble, for which I am sorry."

"Then we'll let it drop, on one condition. I want you an' Border Bullet ter agree ter fight no duel."

There was a visible struggle in Richard's mind.

"I promise!" he said, presently.

"An' you, Border Bullet?"

"I echo the promise. Let our trouble be buried," the Sharpshooter frankly answered.

"Jes' so—jes' so! Thought we could come ter a frien'y understandin'; most things do let up, 'cept newrolgy. Now let us go ter camp. Guv'nor an' Miss Longstepper is keepin' the place alone, an' I don't depend no great on any on 'em. I once knowed a man who couldn't take care o' nothin' until he had a fam'bly o' infants. Thar was sixteen on 'em—no; come ter think on't, one was a 'dopted child—an' the father run the nursery room. He was pow'ful handy, an' could rock one in the cradle, toss another up in the air, play ball with a third, trot one on each knee, chastise another, an' let seven pull his whiskers, all ter once. The other nine had Injun clubs, dolls an' razors ter 'muse themselves with."

Yank's flow of language and good humor seemed to have no limit. A whimsical smile hovered around his mouth; he stroked his beard and gave each of his hearers an occasional nod; and seemed to be perfectly at ease.

There was always something infectious about his high flow of spirits, and it was so, in a measure, now; the troubled waters were quieted, and even Prior felt too much ashamed to renew the quarrel even by a look.

The party went to the hut, where they found Abigail trying to teach Guy'nor the constitution and by-laws of the Anti-Demon-of-Drink Society.

The eminent lady became silent suddenly, and, throwing her nose well up in the air, scanned each one of the new-comers narrowly; after which she several times nodded her head with a sharpness which threatened dislocation of her neck. Shortly after she conveyed her impressions to Guv'nor in a tragic whisper:

"Boy, look on these misguided creatures an' take warnin'! I'm jest as sure as you're alive that them men has b'en drinkin'!"

Yank did not allow conversation to drift into dangerous channels, and, to keep it at the safety point, did most of the talking himself, and told numerous alleged reminiscences of his past life.

No one seemed anxious to usurp his place as chief entertainer.

Richard Prior was grave and thoughtful; Border Bullet composed but silent; Inez sat with her face concealed by her hand; Agnes was nervous and ill at ease; while Peter Lefferts thrust his porcupine-like head forward and studied each face before him with sharp curiosity.

This man did not please Nevermiss. True, he had not pleased him at the start, but the mountaineer's misgivings increased. Old Porcupine was rough, ignorant, ill-bred and brutal, yet some Western wanderers have these qualities and remain honest. Yank doubted Peter's honesty. He had a secret, skulking, inquisitive way, quite the reverse of what Yank liked to see in his associates.

Later, Inez spoke to Lefferts and they passed out of the hut. The mountaineer watched them but said nothing. Half an hour later Inez came to him.

"Mr. Yellowbird," she abruptly began, "I have something to say to you."

"Glad on't, by hurley! I ain't so young as I used ter be, but I'm vain enough ter like a pooty gal ter talk with."

"We won't argue as to who is pretty and who is not. What I have to say," Inez steadily explained, "is this: I am going to leave your camp!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A DEFECTION.

YANK YELLOWBIRD nearly dropped his rifle in his surprise.

"What?" he exclaimed.

"I am going to thank you for your kindness," steadily answered Inez, "and leave your camp forever."

"Land o' Goshen!" the mountaineer blankly ejaculated.

"I beg that you will not feel hurt, or think me ungrateful. You have been kind, and I fully realize the goodness which prompts you to extend a helping hand to all. Bear this in mind when I am gone."

Yank fell to stroking his beard diligently.

"Low me ter ask where you're goin'!"

Inez moved her hand in a circle.

"Somewhere—anywhere."

"Be you aware that is jest whar the Injuns be?"

"Yes."

"Ain't you afeerd on 'em?"

"Yes; but I shall try to avoid them."

"Um! Is yer father goin'?"

"No."

"No?"

"He refuses to go."

"Jes' so! An' may I ask why you want ter go?"

"I had rather you wouldn't. Just let me pass quietly out of your sight, and forget that such a person as Inez Lefferts ever lived."

She had made a visible effort to be calm and unconcerned, but there was bitterness in her voice now. The strong will rule the weak, and her unspoken thoughts were more powerful than the mask of outward ease she had assumed. The mountaineer laid one broad hand on her arm.

"Little woman," he said, persuasively, "don't do it. Don't think on't! Why, I couldn't no more see you keep this rash resolve, than I could chop off my rifle-finger. I've kep' the facks from you all, but these hills are swarmin' with the atrocious red insex an' them deserters under Nolaw. They're arter us hot, an' murder is in their minds; it is, sure as you an' me stan' byar. I've seen the creetur's a-skulkin' about an' lookin' fur trails; an' I tell you they're full o' animosity from their skul-lock's ter their thumb-toes. Why, child, you'd be like a lamb among wolves!"

The words fell upon Inez's ears like a voice which lived in her heart, but was unknown, heretofore, to her sense of hearing. Grave, kind, sympathetic and compassionate, the veteran's voice seemed to gather new qualities and appeal to emotions little cultivated in her mind.

Tears gathered in her eyes.

"You are very kind," she faltered.

"I trust that I ain't destertute o' feller-feelin', an' I know jest what dangers lurks in them hills. You said your father wa'n't goin'. Do you mean you thought o' goin' alone?"

She hesitated before replying.

"Yes," she finally answered.

"Why should ye go at all?"

"Don't ask me."

"Some secrets, little woman, are better told than kep'."

"What do you mean?" she asked, with a start.

"You must hev a motive, an' it may be to the good of us all that I know what 'tis."

"Don't ask me!" was the hurried reply.

"I won't," Yank answered, promptly, though his gray eyes lost no varying shade of her expression. "Whatever 'tis, I know that I trust ye. I kin read human natur' some, ef I ain't gifted above the common run, an' all my senses tell me your mind is full o' good. I trust ye parfickly. An' now, promise me you won't desert my party, alone or in company, without lettin' me know on't ahead."

"I promise, and—I thank you many times for your friendly, cheerful words. They are very grateful to me, and I shall feel new courage—"

"To be sure, to be sure," Yank replied, as she came to a full stop. "I understand. Ev'rybody likes ter be well used; I do, an' I've growed old in my fight with the world. But I hope my heart ain't growed hard, nor my better feelings dried up like a spring in the desert; I do so hope, by burley!"

Then, as Border Bullet approached, the grave expression on his face gave place to the old contented, humorous look.

"You're jest in time, lad; I've b'en advisin' this little woman ter set up a bunnit-shop hyar in the hills. We've got a consider'ble female poperlation, an' then, that's the ladies o' Injun extraction; I consait they only need ter know jest what a bunnit is, an' have a lookin'-glass ter tie 'em in front on, an' that'd be a rage fur bunnits. All women take ter them, an' take arter them. I pity a woman who ain't got a bunnit; I do, by hurley!"

"I had a female cousin who was a poetry-writer. She'd take words an' hitch 'em together so the last ones on the string would all rhyme, though how she did it I don't see, I declare. P'raps you've read suthin' o' the sort. Sartain words sound a good 'eal alike, as 'rifle' an' 'trifle,' an' 'beavers' an' 'fevers,' an' 'weasels' an'—an'—wal, say 'weasels' an' 'measles.' That's what's called poetry—not the measles, I don't mean; but the jingle o' the words."

"I understand," said Border Bullet, gravely.

"Wal, this cousin o'mine wanted a bunnit, an' she wanted it bad; that was goin' ter be a funeral, an' she wanted ter go an' git idees fur a poetry piece. She hadn't no bunnit, an' she come ter me.

"I must have one, sez she.

"Whose hev ye got on now? sez I.

"Mine," sez she; "but I can't write poetry in an old bunnit, nohow. I want a new one, sez she.

"I ain't got a spare bunnit ter my name," sez I, "but I seen an egregious poaty one over ter Joggle Me'dder."

"Describe it," sez she.

"Wal," sez I, thoughtful-like, "the saddle part was green; the pommel was orange color; the girt' was illock-hued; an' then that was some red an' blue posies on top," sez I.

"How poetic!" sez she, claspin' her hands.

"An' jest the thing fur a funeral," sez I; "it wouldn't make the mourners feel gloomy."

"I's bound ter agree with her anyhow, fur she'd writ a poem nigh four feet long fur me ter send ter a gal I didn't 'zactly dislike. Wal, she put me up to it, an' I saddled the old mare an' rid ter Joggle Me'dder. My cousin forgot ter give me any money for it, but I got trusted, an' she wore the bunnit ter the funeral. She afterwards perdooced a poem on the inspiration on't, an' give it ter the mourners, an' they used it ter paper the south wall o' their kitchen. It was right whar they could read it any time, an' no wind could git in through them rhymes. The mourners used ter look at it an' shed tears by the hour, an' they's all sorry the late lamented couldn't 'a' lived ter read it, fur they said it would 'a' reconciled him a good 'eal ter dyin'."

The mountaineer looked thoughtfully at the clouds which were sailing overhead, and then aroused and more briskly added:

"I consait poetry is good fur the mind, ef ye don't take too much on't, but it won't brile meat. It's noon, an' ef you'll excuse me, I'll 'tend ter dinner."

He walked toward the hut, leaving Inez and Border Bullet together. She looked at the hunter, and seemed doubtful whether to go or stay.

"Give me one word," said Border Bullet, abruptly. "You heard a charge against me this morning. Prior accused me of having acted the spy upon him and you. Do you believe it?"

Inez met his gaze frankly.

"I do not," she promptly replied.

"Thank you; you only do me justice. I trust that I have not fallen so low as to listen to any conversation not intended for my ears."

"Again I believe you, but, even if you had, by chance, overheard any part of our conversation, there was nothing said that I would not wish you to hear."

"Yes," replied the hunter, somewhat irrelevantly.

"Mr. Prior is not my champion."

Inez's quiet persistence could not well pass unnoticed by Border Bullet, but, man-like, he was not sure that he understood her motive in making the statement.

"He seems rather hot-headed," the sharpshooter replied, "but is, I believe, an honorable man."

"I am but little acquainted with him, but I dare say you are right."

"Would you say as much for me?"

Inez flashed him a quick glance of her dark eyes.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't know. That sounds foolish enough,

and it might be interpreted wrong; but I don't suppose you are interested."

"In what?"

"No wonder you ask; I had grown incoherent. I was thinking of Yellow River."

"What of Yellow River?" the girl quickly replied.

"When we parted there," continued the hunter, feeling the need of more than negative force, and rallying to the requirements of the occasion, "we little thought how we should one day be associated in the Black Hills."

"I am not sure that I deserve to number you among my protectors."

"Why not?"

Inez no longer met his gaze. Her own eyes were downcast, and she was confused. It was not the diffidence of a school-girl, but she was ill at ease, nervous and troubled. All this was apparent, though the cause was not so clear. Border Bullet was trying to study her, and he accompanied his blunt question with a searching gaze that lost no variation of her expression.

"I am not so blind as to suppose that I have your good opinion," she replied.

"Why shouldn't you have it?"

"Because to you, who can see only on the surface, my conduct has not been such as to win it. Bear in mind, though, that the worst of criminals may have some excuse for what they have done."

"I hope," responded Border Bullet, who was regarding her with brows knitted into an earnest, inquiring frown, so anxious was he to understand, "that you do not regard yourself as a criminal."

"I referred only to my past and yours, as they unite."

"You left Yellow River suddenly."

"Yes."

"May I ask—"

He certainly did not ask then. Old Porcupine came hurrying to the spot, anger and suspicion plainly expressed on his face, and privacy was past. He kept close to Inez, and shot glances none too friendly at Border Bullet, evidently determined to stop the conversation then and there. In a few minutes there was a call to dinner, and the subject was dropped for the time.

Shortly after they had finished eating Lefferts and Prior disappeared. Nothing was thought of it until the dog, Moses, entered the hut and, going to Yank, claimed his attention. Moses was naturally a reserved dog, and when he solicited notice, he always secured it. Yank looked and found a scrap of paper tied to the animal's neck. Quickly removing it, the mountaineer found writing on one side, and he read these words:

"MR. YELLOWBIRD:—I hope you will not blame me too much, but I have decided to separate myself from your party. I realize that I made a fool of myself, to-day—my hot temper led me into trouble as usual. I hope you will not regard me as being any worse than I am, and this let me say—I shall not at any time be far away. If you are attacked by the common foe you will find me at hand to help all I can. Should you leave, I shall endeavor to know it, and join you. I do not withdraw in temper, but I thought a short period of hermit life will be beneficial to my blood."

RICHARD PRIOR.

The mountaineer crushed the note in his hand, mused a moment, and then, without a word to any one—nobody had noticed the message so curiously received—tossed the paper in the fire.

With his usual leniency he was inclined to regard Prior with charity, but he was sorry that he had gone away. Danger hovered more darkly over the devoted party than Richard Prior suspected, and he would not have absented himself if he had known all. Yank hardly expected to see him again, for it was possible that another change of base would be made at any moment—perhaps at night—and if, as was necessary, it was made so secretly that the Sioux suspected nothing, it was not likely that Prior would discover it.

One pair of strong arms was lost to the defense.

"Boys will be boys," thought the veteran. "I'm mortal sorry it has happened, but I won't s'arch fur him; I've got more ter look out for. The 'signs' ain't at all favor'ble, an' I'm afeerd that is a heap o' tribulation ahead!"

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD PORCUPINE'S PROPOSAL.

AGNES PRIOR had gone a short distance from the hut and sat down in a retired place. She lacked Inez's familiarity with danger, and would not have gone far alone under any consideration.

Her heart was heavy, and she wanted to be alone; she wanted to reflect on the scene of the morning, though such thoughts brought her only pain. Whatever had been her faults or virtues in the past, she still loved the man who had been her husband. She was not of heroic make, and the ruling passions of her life were love and devotion. When she gave her heart and hand to Richard Prior it meant a sacred obligation for life, and all the dark clouds which had descended upon her had not served to alienate her affections. That morning, however, had seen another wound inflicted upon her; Richard's harsh words had cut deeply.

She was not long left to her reflections.

A step sounded close at hand, and Lefferts appeared.

Now, Old Porcupine had not changed his manner since the first meeting at the hut. He had appeared to be really afraid of Agnes; had avoided her persistently; and when any chance had made it possible for her to address him—which she had no desire to do—he had at once made off. But he now advanced and stopped directly in front of her.

"Enjoyin' yerself?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, absently.

"Mighty fine place here."

"Yes."

"You like the mountains, I take it?"

"No, I don't."

"No."

"How can I? I hate this place."

"Nat'rally—of course. But you like wild life ef that ain't no Injuus 'round, hey?"

"No; I do not."

"Hum! Strange!"

Old Porcupine rubbed his bristly chin, and looked seriously troubled. He had expected and hoped for answers just the reverse of those received, and was for a time discomposed. It was not in his nature to be long at a loss, and he rallied.

"Mum," he said, abruptly, "I've got somethin' ter say ter you. I admire ye like thunder—I do, fur a fact! You jist erbout fill my eye, an' I'm a-lookin' fur a wife. I hereby offer ye my—my respex an' cordiality—an' ax ye ter marry me. Is it a go?"

Agnes had arisen quickly at this singular address. At first she thought that Porcupine was indulging in a poor joke, but the eager light in his eyes undeceived her. Brusque and eccentric as the proposal was, he was very much in earnest, and she was not a little startled. She confronted him with increased color of face.

"Excuse me, sir, but I can hardly believe that you are in earnest," she managed to answer.

"Thunder! but I be. I mean business!"

"Then I thank you, but I shall have to kindly decline your offer. I don't wish to marry any one."

"Now, don't say that! A fine woman like you hain't got no right ter be a bachelter—I mean, a—a widder. See hyar! I've got a heart like a buffer; I'm honest, though I ain't a hypocrite; an' I'm a rough kernel with good meat; an' I ask ye free an' hearty, will ye marry me? Come, w'ot d'ye say?"

Old Porcupine was growing more eager, and Agnes feared, dangerous, too.

"No, no!" she returned. "Thank you, again, but I will not marry any one."

Lefferts rubbed his chin harder than ever, and his expression grew speculative.

"Look-a-hyar," he proceeded. "Some on us hev clouds onter our lives, an' we feel sorry, an' our good names ain't so good as we could wish. Mum, you marry me an' I'll see that the myst'ry that parted you an' Dick Prior is cleared up, an' yer name cleared. Yes, sirree!"

Agnes gazed at him in bewilderment and agitation.

"What do you mean?" she tremulously asked.

"You didn't run away with Reg Eyre, an' I know it. I'll prove it, too, ef you'll marry me."

"How does it happen that you know anything about my past life?"

Lefferts hesitated, and then answered with confusion which would have branded him a falsifier had she been calm enough to weigh words, looks and actions.

"He told me—Dick Prior."

"Did you tell him you could prove my innocence?" eagerly asked Agnes.

"Not much! Not I!"

"Man, if you will go to him and clear me—"

"I won't; not by a blamed sight! Ef you say a word ter him, my mouth is closed forever," hastily declared the borderer. "I want you fur myself, not fur him. Say you'll marry me, an' I'll clear ye."

"How do you know anything about my past? How can you clear my reputation?"

"Them is p'inted questions, an' ones I don't keer ter answer. Let it be enough that I kin do what I say."

"It is not enough. A moment ago you said, when I asked how you knew anything about my past life, that Mr. Prior told you. If such is the fact, what means have you of proving my innocence? Did Mr. Prior say I was innocent?"

"No."

"Then how can you prove it?"

Lefferts shifted his weight uneasily from foot to foot.

"I can't go on hyar an' tell a long story," he answered, looking away from her, "but I kin do what I claim. Let us s'pose that I knew about your case months ago, an' hold the facts o' the case in my hand. I do that same, an' I kin clear ye, sure."

Agnes was trembling with excitement.

"Sir," she exclaimed, "if you will do that I will bless you forever."

"An' become my wife?"

"No, no; don't ask that. Thank you, very much, but I can't do it."

"Then I won't open my jaws fur you," sullenly replied Old Porcupine.

"If you can do what you say, I will pay you well—"

"No, you won't: I ain't ter be bought off with no money. I know what I claim, an' kin prove it all, but I won't, except on one consideration. Marry me, an' I'll clear ye! Unless ye do, I swar that I never'll go for ter say a thing. Now don't waste any words; don't put in any weak coaxin', nor nothin' o' that sort, fur it won't do a bit o' good. I'm Old Porcupine, the Lost Link from Locust, an' I know my business. I'm honest, but I ain't no hypocrite. I ain't a flat, neither. I'm bound ter look out fur Number One. Ef I kin help you an' me at the same time I'll do it, but I'll be hanged ef I help you without gettin' no good out on't myself!"

He spoke with surly emphasis, but Agnes was not inclined to abandon hope so easily. She made an eloquent appeal, and tried to arouse better feelings in his mind, but the result proved conclusively that they were not there to arouse.

He stubbornly persisted in the position he had taken, and when it became clear that she would not under any circumstances consent to marry him, his temper gave way entirely.

"All right, my lady!" he harshly observed, "you kin have it your own way. I reckon thar is other women in the world besides you, an' I don't think I keer fur sech a softy as you be. I'll do without you, an' you kin do without the proof that you didn't run away with Reg Eyre. You'll have ter do without it, fur I swar I won't lift a finger for ye now. That's all I've got ter say!"

Turning abruptly, he hastened away along the side of the ridge and soon disappeared. Agnes did not try to stop him; she had had a glimpse of his inner nature, revealed both by violent words, not recorded here, and by looks which spoke as plainly, and she was alarmed.

She felt sure that Peter Lefferts was a man to fear.

Once more alone, she meditated carefully, and as a result, came to doubt the man wholly. What could he possibly know in regard to her past life that would act either for or against her? There had been many persons who knew about her sad b'story as defendant in a divorce case, but it was not likely that Lefferts was one of them; she could not believe it.

Proudly, desiring to gain her promise to marry him, he had manufactured his claim out of nothing, after hearing Richard's account of the affair.

Opposed to this theory was the strong impression that Old Porcupine might have spoken falsely when he claimed that Richard had told him the story. Agnes knew that Prior was inclined to be very secretive, and, though hot-tempered, he had the instincts of a gentleman. It was very strange that, if he felt inclined to confide in any one, he should select such a low, ignorant person as Lefferts.

Agnes recalled the evident surprise of Old Porcupine when he first saw her at Yank's hut. She did not know that she had ever seen the man up to that time, but he had certainly acted strangely. Possibly he had formed his false claims upon actual knowledge of the painful epoch in her past life.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SIOUX CHIEF.

IT was several hours later when Border Bullet stood in a gulch in a thoughtful mood. Like Agnes Prior, he had matters upon his mind which did not bear upon the attempt to avoid the Sioux and deserters, and he found it impossible to keep his thoughts from straying. They did stray—to Inez.

He remembered what she had said to him during their last interview: "Bear in mind that the worst of criminals may have some excuse for what they have done!" He felt sure that this was an appeal to him not to judge her too harshly, but it was of no value while it went unexplained. It only served to disturb his mind and divert his attention from other subjects.

Standing there in the gulch he knew that he ought to be on the alert for danger, yet he was as forgetful of it as though he stood in some peaceful settlement. The sound of footsteps suddenly fell upon his ears, and he turned quickly.

What he saw was startling in the extreme—an Indian stood not forty feet away.

Just then the movements of the red-man were not hostile, but Border Bullet suddenly raised his rifle. Even then, however, there was no aggressive motion on the new-comer's part. Instead, he held out one empty hand, with the palm turned toward the Sharpshooter.

"Be calm!" he said, in a deep, powerful voice, which was singularly musical for an Indian's, even as his English was strikingly good. "I am not here as your enemy, white man."

"I was not aware that I had any red friends," the hunter guardedly replied, without relaxing his vigilance.

"Strange things sometimes occur, and the black bear does not always fight the brown bear simply because their color is different."

"You are a Sioux?"

"The white man can see it."

"And the Sioux are on the war-path."

"Seeking the party to which the white man belongs."

"True. How, then, can you claim to be my friend?"

"I will prove it by a witness. Words are empty, but there is one whom you will not doubt. It would be a waste of time to try and make you believe, white man, so I only ask you to see that I am not now in a mood to fight. See! I come without any weapon but a revolver, and that is in my belt. Is Nevermiss near?"

The manner of the Indian was grave and dignified, and Border Bullet was impressed, despite his doubt. He felt that this was no ordinary savage. He seemed more like a king of red-men. He was tall and powerfully built; his face was earnest, bold and strong; his features were singularly regular for one of his race; his dark eyes were keen, steady and piercing; and he had, withal, a lofty air which the hunter was not accustomed to associate with those of Indian blood.

To the last question Border Bullet replied:

"Yank is at the camp."

"Will you ask him to come here?"

Border Bullet hesitated; this might be a cunning device to learn the exact situation of the camp.

A grave smile crossed the Indian's face.

"Still suspicious? This is not well. I tell you, Border Bullet, that prudence requires you, not to doubt me, but to bring Nevermiss at once. There is danger to him and his party, and the tall white warrior should know it at once. Storm-Cloud and his men have been looking in the wrong place, but if your party stays in the gulch by the lake another night, they will stay there as clods. I speak to attentive ears now, but if you doubt me, those ears will to-morrow be those of a dead man. Go to Nevermiss, and tell him that Mountain Eagle is here!"

The last sentence was somewhat peremptorily uttered, but it was not needed. Border Bullet had been convinced. The allusion to the "gulch by the lake" showed that the Indian already knew where the camp was, and the hunter also remembered the Indian he thought he had seen with Yank on a former occasion.

"I will go," he promptly answered.

"Stay! Let no one else hear you speak to Nevermiss, and if he is in the hut, call him outside in a way which will not alarm the women or attract their attention."

The Sharpshooter promised and hastened away. He found Yank alone near the camp, and at once told his story. The mountaineer did not seem surprised, though he was manifestly uneasy for a moment.

"I'll go with ye," he promptly answered, and started without delay.

"I take it you know Mountain Eagle?"

"Suminut. Yes—yes' so."

"Is he really friendly?"

"You can risk all your fortune on't."

"Yet he is a Sioux chief, and wears the trapping of an Indian on the war-path."

"We're all human—I be, you be, an' he is—an' we act 'cordin' ter our natur'. An eagle don't build its nest in our barns, nor a dove ketch sheep an' small infants an' fly away with 'em. Your Injun is an Injun, an' he's got a natur' ter suit, but you an' me needn't fear him. I'd trust him whar I wouldn't trust many white men—I would, by hurley!"

"Then we have one friend among the enemy."

"To be sure; an' it's wal we hev. What d'ye s'pose has bothered Storm-Cloud so much? Was it our uncommon 'cuteness'? Not all that, lad; not all that. Mountain Eagle has played havoc with the old chief's plans."

"Confess, mountaineer, that I saw you and Mountain Eagle together, by the lake-side, as I claimed!"

"You did; an' Guv'nor wa'n't so fur out o' the way that night by the bluff. This is fur your private ear, lad; don't let it git abroad, fur we have them in our Body-Guard—it's a funny Body-Guard, now—I wouldn't trust no more than I would a serpent."

"I will be silent."

By this time they had arrived in sight of the young chief, who remained where Border Bullet had left him, and the hunter, mindful of the fact that there might be more secrets, and some not intended for his ears, paused some distance away. Yank went forward alone. Mountain Eagle saluted him with a grave gesture, and then they at once began to converse.

Whatever they had to say appeared to be of importance. No time was allowed to go to waste; they talked steadily and earnestly, with an occasional gesture here and there. That there was perfect accord between them was clear, for Yank appeared exactly as though talking with one of his own party.

This lasted at least twenty minutes, and then they separated. Mountain Eagle moved away, and was soon concealed by the trees and rocks, while Yank retraced his steps with a serious expression. He moved toward the hut, and Border Bullet walked beside him, but the elder man did not seem inclined to talk. Border Bul-

let was not disposed to remain wholly in ignorance, and he finally broke the silence.

"Is danger close at hand?" he asked.

"I won't conceal from you that 'tis," the mountaineer readily replied. "Storm-Cloud an' Lieutenant Nolaw are hard at it, an' our camp ain't no longer a place o'security. We must get away afore mornin'."

"Where are we to go?"

"Down the lake."

"And where then?"

"No furder."

"Is there a refuge near there?"

"I consait thar is; a cute sort o' a cave, hollered out o' the rocks by natur'. Mountain Eagle told me on't, an' I've b'en thar an' seen it. Speakin' o' the Sioux chief—Mountain Eagle, I mean—I hope ye obsarved him wal."

"I did."

"Wal, never draw a bead on that Injun. No matter what the circumstances be, nor how much things may be ag'in' him in look—even if you're a pris'ner, an' he's one o' them that has got ye—don't doubt him. Don't let nothin' tempt ye ter raise a hostile hand ag'in' him!"

Yank spoke with unusual earnestness, and he had paused and was shaking his forefinger emphatically to accompany his remarks.

"I'll remember, friend Nevermiss."

"I know Mountain Eagle, root an' branch. He don't trace his pedigree as fur as the Yellowbirds do, mebbe, but he's got a soul like a mountain. I dunno why sech a natur' was put inter an Injun's body, but I consait the Master o' men, an' events, an' worlds, knowed what He was doin'. He allays does, fur His wisdom an' marcy are as great as the things He rules over, an' you see His work hyar!"

The mountaineer spoke reverently, and moved his brown hand toward the abode of Nature he loved so well. He made a brief pause, and then went on with a noticeable change of voice:

"Thar is one I can't recommend so high as the Injun chief. I refer ter Old Porcupine. You an' I wanter keep an eye on that egregious insex, for he is a condemn'd snake in the grass. He's wuss than a rattler, fur he don't give no warnin' afore he strikes. Look out fur him; don't trust him, an' don't give him no chance ter play us false. Mehbe, though, I shall put a' arton o' restraint on to his comin's an' goin's."

"You have received news of him from the chief, I judge."

"I hev, by burley! I happen ter know that Leg-it has be'n ter the inemy's camp, an' that is why he's lost my respects. But, hyar we be at camp; say nothin', an' look as cheerful as a widder with a new husband."

Yank set a good example. He walked unconcernedly into the hut, made a characteristic remark, and then sat down and branched off into a story. If he had been at peace with the whole world he could not have been more at ease, outwardly, and he lured Inez and Mrs. Prior out of their gloomy mood as though by enchantment.

Border Bullet had not shared the vicissitudes of the tall mountaineer's life nearly a year without learning to know him well, and every day he admired the man more. In his opinion there was no one else like Yank Yellowbird. Brave as a lion, he had a heart as tender as a woman. Desiring only peace with his fellow-men, he was, nevertheless, always ready to act as the champion of the needy, and when in battle, he was a host in himself. His self-control was remarkable, and, as in the present case, he was often the most genial, whimsical and pleasant, when danger was the most imminent. He was all that was honest, kind, unselfish, loyal and brave, and, as usual, Border Bullet now listened with ready sympathy to whatever his host had to say.

A step sounded at the door, and Peter Lefferts reappeared.

CHAPTER XVI.

FLIGHT!

YANK looked up, and nodded with an appearance of cordiality.

"Hello! got back, ain't ye, neighbor?"

Old Porcupine set his rifle up in the corner.

"I seem ter be back," he answered, gruffly.

"To be sure. Seen any Injuns?"

"Not a red," responded Lefferts, with an air of frankness.

"That's encouragin'. I'm o' a sociable natur', but I'll be thrashed ef I want Injun visitors. They're wuss than a donation-party at a minister's, for they'll leave the parson his skulp an' an Injun won't. We dont want 'em hyar, by burley. I had a female relation once who was so uncommon fond o' company that when she's a young woman she received members o' her own sect doorin' the day, an' set up evenin's with the young men. It was a mortal strain on her nervous system, an' she finally married one on 'em, who was a doctor, to take keer on her. The Yellowbirds allays was addicted ter matrimony, an' they all got married except them that remained single. How was your family, Porcupine?"

"I don't know no better one."

"Whar do they hail from?"

"Anywhar they happen ter be at night."

"I consait you must 'a' had a birthplace!"

"I didn't. I've b'en travelin' around ever

sence I was introduced ter the world. I fight my own way, an' I do it wal. I'm honest, but I ain't a hypocrite. Ef folks use me wal I'm a lamb, but ef they use me mean, they ginerally live ter repent it."

He shot a furtive glance at Agnes.

"Ain't malev'lent, be ye?" asked Yank.

"Tread on my toes an' see."

"I ain't subjick ter sech capers. I kin find room fur my feet 'thout walkin' all over other folks. The ground is good enough fur me ter walk on. Can't say, Porcupine, that yer da'rt'er looks like you."

"That ain't her fault."

"Should say not, an' she don't seem much the loser. I must say she is rayther pootier than you be, but beauty ain't all the good p'ints afoot. You an' me are made fur hard knocks in the hills, Porcupine. D'y'e s'pose thar is any danger from the Injuns?"

"Not a bit," Lefferts promptly replied.

"What does your pooty da'rt'er say?"

"I don't see why you should ask me," Inez replied, smiling. "I am not an Indian-fighter, nor a judge of their ways. It seems to me, though, that we should take every possible precaution."

"The best thing we kin do," declared Abigail, "is to p'nt our noses south an' never stop until we git inter civilized parts. I was a fool ter ever get inter this scrape, an' ter think I did it all ter save that beast, Man, from fillin' himself up with whisky like a toad! What would the sisters o' the Anti-Demon-of-Drink Society say ef they knew o' my unparalleled misfortun's! Oh! the degenerate days! Oh! the vanished joys o' peace! Oh! the degradation of man, an' the suff'rin's o' woman! Oh! the malignant power o' the drink-demon! Oh! oh!"

And Miss Longstreeter clasped her hands and rolled her eyes until they seemed in danger of hopping out over her spectacles like jumping-jacks.

"Oh! oh!" echoed Yank. "Your woes are suthin' te'chin', by hurley, an' you ought ter be back in Connecticut. I reelly wish you was. It would be better fur us, an' you an' the sisters could hav a reg'lar spree."

Miss Abigail elevated her sharp nose.

"Sir," she severely replied, "I would thank you not ter use sech a low, repulsive name in connection with me. A 'spree' is what you indulge in when you've b'en drinkin', as I clearly see you hav now."

"Land o' Goshen!" good-humoredly answered Yank, "what an obsarvin' creetur' you be. Your eyes must a' b'en right sharp afore you got so old."

Abigail sat dumfounded. Despite all the troubles she had been through she did not suppose that any one would have the temerity to insinuate that she was old. The power of retaliation absolutely deserted her, and she found no words of reply until an answer would have seemed absurd; but she was more than ever convinced that Yank had been "drinkin'."

Darkness fell upon the gulch, but Yank made no haste to reveal the fact that their present camp was to be abandoned during the night. His manner continued undisturbed, but he twice went outside and looked about. Once Old Porcupine did the same thing, but it came to pass that the mountaineer appeared at his side very innocently, and if Lefferts had evil intentions, he found no chance to carry them out.

Later, Yank went once more, and took all the horses around the northeastern point of the lake to a place previously selected for them. This was no easy task, for he had to break the trail, but, having already studied this matter out, he did the work systematically. Last of all he brought two canoes to the rocks near the camp, and all was ready for departure.

There were now seven persons in the party—Yank, Border Bullet, Lefferts, Guv'nor, Inez, Agnes and Miss Longstreeter; and out of the whole number only two were to be depended upon in a crisis. Guv'nor needed no protection, as he was able to care for himself, but Lefferts was worse than the women. There is no burden like a traitor.

Nevermiss realized this, and was prepared to act decisively. He did not intend to take the man with them to the new refuge, to again betray them. Mountain Eagle had told Yank plainly that Lefferts had been to Lieutenant Nolaw and Storm-Cloud and told the secret of their refuge, and the man, when questioned, had flatly denied having seen an Indian. He had been given a chance to redeem himself, and, having thrown it away, there was no more to be said.

The mountaineer would have accused him plainly, and then made him a prisoner and left him in the hut, but there was Inez to consider. Whether she would cling to her unworthy father was uncertain, but she must be saved despite herself.

Yank re-entered the hut with a calm, confident air.

"Porcupine," said he, readily, "your boss has gone out o' the gulch. Must a' wandered away, som'ers, an' I consait we'd better look arter the egregious insex right away. The newrolgy is givin' me some pooty hard licks, but I allow that boss must be got back, pain or no pain."

Old Porcupine was already on his feet.

"Right you be," he agreed. "I wouldn't lose the varmint nohow, for a hoss is a hoss nowadays. I'll git him back, an' then break his durned neck."

"Jes' as you say about that, but don't lose no time. We'll hurry along, an' hev him as soon as we can."

The two men passed out of the hut. Border Bullet waited until their steps were no longer to be heard, and then quietly arose.

"Good people," he said, "I will trouble you to prepare for a journey. We are to leave here at once!"

Inez, Agnes and Abigail looked at him in silent surprise.

"Yank and Old Porcupine," added the hunter, "are managing this matter to suit themselves. I have nothing to say in regard to the plan they have formed, but one thing I can tell you—the Indians have discovered our camp, and it is a matter of vital necessity that we go as quickly as we can."

"Oh! oh! we shall all be scalped!" lamented Abigail, wringing her hands.

"Hope de Injines ain't b'en drinkin'," seriously observed Guv'nor, winking at Border Bullet.

"Where are we to go?" asked Inez, very calmly.

"To a refuge which is all prepared for us—I can't stop to explain now," the Sharpshooter replied.

"But Yank and father?"

"Will join us as soon as they can. Come, let no time be lost, but get away as soon as possible."

While speaking Border Bullet had been gathering up the camp utensils. These had been kept so that it was the work of only a short time to get them together, and, aided by Guv'nor, the hunter soon completed the task.

The women had by no means recovered from their surprise, but Border Bullet was carrying everything along with him, with a quiet air of authority, and they were left without much to say. There was no suspicion that the absence of Yank and Old Porcupine meant anything more than was visible on the surface, though they thought the arrangement somewhat peculiar. Inez and Agnes finally aroused and helped somewhat, while Moses walked about with an inquiring, suspicious air.

The gaunt dog was always a factor in every movement made. Yank had trained him carefully; he was sagacious; and his movements at times were indicative of a keenness of instinct rarely possessed even by his intelligent species. He knew now that a removal was to be made, and seemed to associate it with danger. Several times he walked to the hut entrance and, elevating his nose, sniffed at the air and, showing his teeth, growled menacingly, but there was nothing to indicate that he scented the proximity of danger.

When all was ready they passed quietly out of the hut. The silence which lay over the gulch was oppressive; it seemed to be unnatural, and every moment the fugitives expected to see bloodthirsty Indians start from the bushes and oppose their departure. Instinctively the women stepped softly when they moved away, as though the savages were liable to be near enough to hear an ordinary footfall.

Border Bullet led the way to the lake. The canoes were found where Yank had left them, half concealed by bushes which grew at the foot of the low ridge that formed the bank. The camp utensils were packed in these craft, though little space was needed, and then the human freight entered. According to Yank's directions two of the non-combatants were placed in each canoe—Inez and Miss Longstreeter in one, and Agnes and Guv'nor in the other.

Moses was not disposed to hurry, and he moved back and forth on the bank in a manner so uneasy as to trouble the Sharpshooter. He knew the dog's sagacity, and feared that his present manner indicated actual danger.

A period of waiting followed, while Border Bullet looked anxiously for Nevermiss. He knew the mountaineer's plan; it was to lead Lefferts well away and then give him the slip in the darkness and hasten to the canoes.

Minutes wore away without any sign, and Agnes and Abigail manifested an uneasiness which Border Bullet tried in vain to quiet. He knew better than they what cause there was for fear, and wished most earnestly for Yank's return.

Hark! what was that? A sound above, which might have been the alighting of a panther after a spring—a confused sound as though of a struggle! Then the sharp crack of a rifle followed—Border Bullet knew it to be Yank's—and a Sioux war-whoop rung out upon the air. A hearty, defiant English shout came quickly after, and the report of a revolver. Then the whole air seemed to be full of war-whoops, and two men appeared at the top of the bluff, locked in a desperate struggle.

CHAPTER XVII.

ADVENTURES IN THE CANOE.

BORDER BULLET leaped to his feet. Even in the darkness he recognized one of the struggling

men as Yank, while it was equally clear that his adversary was an Indian. The young man was about to spring to the mountaineer's aid, but at that moment Yank seemed to put forth new strength. He raised the Indian in his strong arms and flung him headlong to the rocks below.

Again Yank shouted defiantly.

"Come on, ye atrocious red insex!" he cried. "The Yellowbird blood is up, an' I'd as soon quarrel as not. I had, by hurley!"

He had turned at bay as he spoke, and even while Border Bullet wondered why he did not seize the chance to gain the canoes, the veteran shot down a Sioux with his revolver almost touching the swarthy breast.

"Pull, Border Bullet; pull for your life!" added the mountaineer, and then the young man saw him surrounded by Indians.

But Border Bullet did not touch the paddle. He could not desert his old friend in such an emergency; he threw up his rifle and fired at one of the Sioux, who went down in a heap. At the same moment Yank, who was fighting like a tiger, swept back his assailants, and with a ringing cheer bounded down the bank.

"The paddle, lad; the paddle!" he hurriedly directed. "Pull like hurley!"

Another moment and he was in the canoe which he was to navigate, and, like the Sharpshooter, he grasped a paddle and dipped water. Just then Moses, who had been absent for a few seconds, bounded down the bank and leaped into Border Bullet's canoe; but close after him came the Sioux. A dozen were already in sight.

The Sharpshooter was lucky in his start, and he sent the canoe shooting away in excellent form, but it was different with Yank. Some one on the bluff had thought of a weapon not recognized in legitimate warfare, and a large stone fell crashing into the second canoe, cutting its way through the frail bottom as though it had fallen on an egg-shell.

A rush of water followed, and Agnes leaped to her feet with a cry. A moment more and the canoe was bottom-side up, and its late occupants struggling in the lake.

Border Bullet saw the mishap and ceased paddling, but once more Yank's voice arose.

"Don't stop, lad!" cried the mountaineer, in a clear voice. "Pull fur yer life!—pull!"

Several rifle-balls whistled past the first canoe, and they were enough to decide Border Bullet. To him it seemed cowardly to desert Yank, but nothing would excuse his keeping Inez and Abigail exposed to the leaden hail. With a heavy heart he resumed paddling, and sent the canoe shooting forward again toward the center of the lake. All his attention was on the shore, however, and he saw the Sioux rush down to the water's edge. After that the darkness intervened and he saw no more, except one flash which was followed by a rifle-report.

Border Bullet shivered when he heard it—what did it indicate in regard to Yank?

The young man had no means of knowing, for, as he went on, his ears became as useless as his eyes; utter silence reigned along the bluff, so far as he could hear. Heavy as was his heart he did not forget his duty, and he continued to paddle until the islands were reached. He had been directed by Yank, in case of any emergency, to go to a certain point and await developments, and this he proceeded to do.

There was a brief lull after they came to a stop and then Inez broke the silence.

"Heaven have mercy upon them!" she murmured, brokenly.

"I hope it will," the hunter answered.

"Do you think there is hope?"

"Yank Yellowbird is there!"

"True; but think of the Sioux opposed to him."

"He has passed successfully through hundreds of dangers—I hope he will do so again."

"But Mrs. Prior?"

"Her chances of escape are small, but I do not think her life is in danger; she is wanted alive."

"Did you see my father?"

"No."

"I am afraid he was killed before Yank reached the bluff."

"I don't think so. According to Yank's plans, your father is more likely to be safe in the hills."

The time had not yet come for revealing Old Porcupine's treachery.

Moses thrust his nose forward, scented the air and growled uneasily. He had been a very quiet passenger while the canoe was in motion, for Yank had taught him well, but his manner had been fierce enough to alarm one not well acquainted with him. Plainly, the dog longed to get at the red foes which he had often fought at his master's side.

Miss Abigail raised her voice lugubriously.

"This is a melancholy day!" she lamented, ignoring the fact that the time was night, "an' the horrors is around us. What would the sisters o' the Anti-Demon-of-Drink Society say ter see us now! Oh, the degenerate days! Oh, the tumblin' down o' the temple o' peace! Oh, the sin an' sorror o' the world, an' the corruption o' the people in it! Oh, oh! An' all this comes o' drinkin's an' carousin's, an' the glamour

an' stupidity o' them who drink! I know when it's done, an' MY eyes hev not b'en blind the last few days! I've seen the carryin's on, an' the sinful imbibin's; or ef I ain't, I've seen the sor-erful effecks. Oh, oh!"

Border Bullet turned upon her sharply.

"Be silent, woman!" he commanded, sternly. "I will not listen to such talk now. I know, personally, that the only liquor that has been in Yank's camp during the last month has been a pint-flask of whisky for medical use, and that it is in yonder package, as full as it was a month ago. You are usually too ridiculous to be noticed, but I will not listen to your unjust insinuations while noble Yank is in danger. Not a word more!"

Miss Abigail subsided with an indistinct muttering. She was not subdued, but judging Border Bullet according to her prevailing idea of the male sex, was actually afraid that he would throw her into the lake.

Time wore on slowly and painfully. No further sounds came from the bluff, and the darkness desir'd the hunter's gaze. The night was calm, and the waters of the lake seemed hardly to move. The encompassing shores, seen only as a vague background, had a slumberous aspect; and nothing now told of the movements of life-seeking men. Yet, Border Bullet dared not relax his vigilance. Considering how much in earnest Storm-Cloud and Lieutenant Nolaw were, it seemed impossible that they should allow the lake to go unsearched. Possibly they had no water-craft, but they were likely to contrive some way to satisfy themselves what had become of the escaped canoe.

Every moment the hunter expected to see a hostile manifestation, and, looking at the dark shores, he could imagine the red foemen stealing along, seeking to find the coveted prey. And if they appeared near the canoe, he was but one man. Years of border experience had disciplined the Sharpshooter's nerves; for himself he did not worry; but he knew that he could not defend two females against Storm-Cloud's warriors.

Half an hour passed without change in the situation, and then Moses grew more uneasy. He thrust his nose further forward, scented the air and growled slightly, but Border Bullet could see nothing out of the way.

Suddenly, however, the dog fixed his gaze decisively on one point, and the young man saw an arm raised above the water only a few feet away, but a well-known voice sounded just as Border Bullet raised his rifle.

"Hullo, thar!—bullo, bullo! All quiet, Border Bullet? Ef so, I'll thank ye ter take me in, fur sech a duckin' as this is mortal bad fur the new-roly. Like as not I'll hev an egregious heap o' tribulation out on't."

It was Yank Yellowbird, and as he spoke the last words he reached the canoe. The hunter extended a hand, and Nevermiss easily entered the craft.

"Soft an' easy!" he at once added. "Don't nobody speak too loud, or thar'll be a condemn'd disturbance 'round hyar. Lay low, fur the red insex is out."

He shook the water from his drenched garments, while Moses bestowed dog-kisses upon one of his master's big, brown hands, and repressed a desire to frisk about only by recalling the fact that he was a Spartan dog.

"Do you mean that they are on the lake?" asked the hunter.

"They be, by hurley!"

"In canoes?"

"No; I reckon they don't own a canoe; but thar has b'en at least one raft made, an' ef they ain't la'nched it yit, they will soon. Besides, thar are swimmers at it. We must use more caution nor a fox, but thar ain't no need o' gittin' flurried. My left foot is composed, an' ef thar was acute danger, the weak sister would be jerkin' like a house on fire. Don't stir, but let me move around!"

Yank peered sharply into the darkness. His usual coolness was apparent, but under all Border Bullet could see a shade of real anxiety; and he knew that the danger was more threatening than the mountaineer would confess.

"My father? What of him?" Inez cautiously asked.

"Safe in the bills, little woman."

"And Mrs. Prior?"

"I wish I could say as much o' her an' Guv'nor."

Yank turned an anxious face toward the east shore.

"They are not—I hope the Indians have not done them harm."

"They're wal an' movin', I cou'sait, though I don't jest know how ter figger it. Thar is an egregious myst'ry about the case, which I'll explain later. Let me hev the paddle, lad!"

He put out his hand without removing his gaze from the surface of the lake, and then dipped the paddle.

"Not a word now, for some time," he cautioned.

The canoe again moved forward, its movements as light as those of a water-fowl. Few Indians could surpass the tall mountaineer with tha paddle, and he was trying his best now. Scarcely a ripple betrayed the strokes he made,

and the canoe seemed like a phantom craft on a sea of glass. Moses crouched near his master, his nose elevated and his whole manner that of a dog keenly on the alert, but Yank did not fear that his canine friend would commit an indiscretion. Border Bullet sat with his rifle ready for use.

Yank paddled in between the two largest islands, and then paused at their extremity. He plainly wished to go on, but was doubtful if it was safe.

Events soon showed the wisdom of his prudence.

With a quick, easy movement of the paddle he suddenly sent the canoe darting backward, and then laid it against the bank of the largest island.

"Keep mum!" he burriedly directed. "The atrocious raft is comin', jest as I expected 'twould. I'm right glad we hev seen it, an' now I feel easier. All wo've got ter do is ter dodge 'em. When my ancestor, Noah Yellowbird, was a boy, he once seen a party o' emigrants get away from the Shawnee Injuns by crossin' the Red Sea on low land durin' a dry spell, but I don't s'pose thar'd be a drought hyar ef we was ter wait a month. The best way we kin keep up our family pedigree hyar is ter dodge, I consait."

Up to this time nobody else had seen the cause of the mountaineer's sudden change of course, but a raft suddenly appeared in the darkness. It moved slowly and clumsily, and with an amount of noise which must have worried its propellers, who were, obviously, Indians; even Inez could tell that.

It was well freighted, and presented a formidable appearance as it approached.

Miss Abigail grasped Yank's arm.

"Save me, dear Mr. Yellowbird!" she gasped. "I ain't ready ter die—"

He turned upon her abruptly.

"Not another word!" he exclaimed. "Be still, or you'll lose your egregious skulp, by' hurley!"

He pushed the canoe closer to the bank, and took up his rifle. While in the water he had been careful to keep it above the surface, and dry, and it was then ready for use. He and Border Bullet presented a firm front, but this did not change the fact that they were menaced by foes six times their number.

The raft entered the space between the two islands, and there it was allowed to stop in obedience to a command in the Indian language. It was only a hundred feet from the fugitives.

CHAPTER XVIII. DANGEROUS NEIGHBORS.

SOMEWHAT to the surprise of those in the canoe, a clear voice sounded in good English from the raft.

"I think we are wasting time, Storm-Cloud. If this Yank Yellowbird is such an infernally shrewd fellow as you state, he wouldn't wait in the middle of this lake to be gobbled up like a blind owl. We waste time here."

"Let my brother be patient," came the reply. "Nevermiss did not go away in the canoe, and he may not be there now."

"The canoe probably went straight to the west shore."

"Why does Black Fox think so?"

"I should have done it."

"Other men are not Black Fox, nor Storm-Cloud. All men do not act alike, for the hearts of some are bigger than others."

"And their heads!" muttered Black Fox, irritably.

"What says my brother?"

"Yours is an old head, and you ought to know. I dare say you are the man to direct things, but I like an active campaign."

"Black Fox is a soldier."

"Wrong, chief—wrong. I am a soldier no longer. I am Lieutenant Nolaw, the freebooter of the bills. I glory in it, and I want to make my mark on the border. I would like nothing better than to get my hands on Yank Yellowbird."

"Nevermiss is hard to catch."

"I'll have him yet; I swear it. Bah! what can be do against our united force? He may run loose for awhile, like a hunted wolf, but we are sure to have him sooner or later."

"We must catch the cunning pale-face!" declared Storm-Cloud, fiercely. "Look you, Black Fox, there is no other man my race hate so bitterly. Many times have our braves gone on the war-path and come back without their strongest young men, and when we asked for them, thar was the reply: 'They met Nevermiss.' Only twelve moons ago Storm-Cloud had a brother who went to a town called Big Missouri, where the ruling white man was known as 'The Duke of Dakota.' My brother did not come back with his comrades, and when Storm-Cloud asked for him there was the old reply: 'Nevermiss was there!' The Sioux have searched for the pale-face's but, but when they found it, it was empty. This has happened more times than you have fingers on your hands, Black Fox!"

The Sioux spoke in an angry, declamatory style, and for once he forgot caution and the need of haste, but he was evidently beset with anger beyond the power of control.

Up to this time Border Bullet had listened attentively, and he could not help thinking how Yank must enjoy it, but his attention was suddenly directed another way. Sounds reached his ears from the island, which were plainly those of footsteps.

What was moving there? Was it man or beast?

Yank suddenly touched his arm.

"Stay hyar!" the veteran said, in a scarcely audible whisper. "Be still, ef you value yer life!"

He was gone almost as soon as he ceased speaking. With movements so cautious that the canoe hardly rocked, he gained the bank and disappeared in the bushes. Moses moved uneasily, but Border Bullet laid a restraining hand upon his head. The young man was then too deeply interested in other matters to heed what Lieutenant Nolaw and Storm-Cloud were saying. Yank had moved toward the suggestive footsteps, and he could surmise what was in the veteran's mind.

He had said that there were Sioux who had gone out on the lake to investigate in their own way, and that, too, by swimming. Was it not likely that one of these fellows had landed on the island, and was creeping stealthily about.

The Sharpshooter held his breath, and waited and listened.

Once more he could hear the soft footfalls, but nothing of Yank.

What was about to occur in the dark wood? Would Yank meet an insignificant animal, or a Sioux, or a wild beast just as deadly?

Border Bullet felt terribly helpless at that moment. Why must he sit in inactivity, and give no aid to his courageous friend? It was painful in the extreme.

"Ah!"

He could not help drawing a quick, sharp breath. He had heard a sudden spring in the woods; a rustling of leaves; a faint sound as of two pygmies struggling—and that was all. It was over almost before he had time to draw that nervous breath, and then the old silence reigned. The leaves trembled languidly, as the wind freshened a little from the northwest, but the soft footsteps sounded no more.

What had happened?

A hand parted the bushes; Yank's voice pronounced the words "All right!" quietly; and then the mountaineer regained the canoe as silently as he had left it.

He volunteered no explanation, but glanced toward the raft. In obedience to a command from Storm-Cloud, the minor Sioux were just beginning to propel it toward the larger island. Yank lifted the paddle, and, dipping the water with wonderful skill, sent the canoe gliding along beneath the overhanging branches of the trees. The result was in doubt, even then, and danger great, but the intervening space was increased foot by foot, and the fugitives began to breathe more freely.

The mountaineer did not pause, and, when prudence would allow, increased his efforts until their speed was considerable. They soon reached the eastern end of the island.

No suspicious object met their gaze on the lake beyond, and Yank headed for the north shore, and paddled briskly. In that direction lay the refuge they were seeking, and if there were no prowling Sioux along the shore, there was fresh ground for hope.

"I consait we can't git ter cover none too quick," Yank observed, as he paddled. "The egregious serpents are out like bees, an' we ain't nowhar nigh safe in a common place."

"You haven't explained about Mrs. Prior yet," said Inez, suggestively.

"That's a fact, but it's b'cause I've b'en busy. As a rule, I don't like ter talk much when I'm busy, though I had an uncle once who was powerfully afflicted that way. He would stop with a mouthful o' food half-swallowed ter argue an obtuse pint, an' go all day with his boot half on ter try an' demonstrate that the moon was inhabited. He finally delayed his weddin' ter dispute with his groomsman about an eclipse twenty year forrard, an' another feller run off with the gal an' married her. He did, by burley! But that don't tell about Agnes an' Guv'nor."

"You see, it made an egregious hubbub when our canoe flopped over an' spilled us in the lake, especially as the bottom on't was stove in like a glass winder; an' I dunno what I should 'a' done ef the Sioux hadn't helped me decide. The red insex piled onto me seven or nine deep, an' I had a most mortal hard tussle. The Yellowbirds ain't a kind ter be kep' down, though, an' I finally shook 'em off, dived, an' got ter shore. When I got thar, Agnes an' that mahogany-colored boy was gone."

"I hung around, an' looked an' harked, an' diskivered that the Injuns didn't know no more than I did. Somehow or other, them two had skipped out while I was fightin' the red insex, an' they'd got clear—they had, by hurley! When I was satisfied on't I made a brief de-tower ter find them, but I didn't find hide nor hair. They'd run away like scart rabbits."

"Now, I hated like mighty ter leave them unprotected, but duty pulled me this way, as wal as thar; an' I knowed the only sensible way

was ter come straight hyar an' git you all inter the cave. I swum fur whar I tol' ye ter stay, Border Bullet, an' hyar I be. I'll put ye all in a safe place, an' then go back an' look arter Agnes an' the boy."

"But the danger!" exclaimed Inez.

"Ter them?"

"To you."

"Land o' Goshen! that don't count. I've b'en in danger ever sence I walked inter my father's kitchen, fifty year ago, an' told him I'd come ter apply fur a position as his son, an' I've got used ter it. Danger," the mountaineer added, "is an old comrade o' mine. We've gone on the trail tergether many a time, an' I never had a frien' who stuck to me more faithful. I'm a Yellowbird, Miss Inez, an' my ancestors would kick up the wu'st kind o' a fuss about the fam'ly pedigree ef I left a helpless woman in tribulation. Don't ask it; I can't do it!"

They advanced near the shore, and he lifted his paddle and allowed the canoe to drift. The bluff was high at that point, and it presented a dark, frowning surface toward which Yank looked in vain for signs to reassure or warn him off. The bluff told no tales.

Dipping the paddle again, he went steadily on until land was reached. The silence continued unbroken.

"I consait we're all right," he cheerfully said. "Jump ashore, an' then I'll hide the canoe; thar is the best o' places hyar for it. That's right, an' now take the household effects, Border Bullet."

They had all passed to the rock against which the mountaineer held the canoe. He now moved this a few feet to the right, and shoved it into some recess under the bank, entirely out of sight. This was a previously-selected hiding-place, and he believed it would be safe from discovery. This duty attended to, he led the way toward the east.

He and Mountain Eagle had planned well, and the fugitives were leaving no trail. The ledge stretched away without any break, and they were able to walk on rocks all the way. The journey, however, was a short one. A hundred yards from the landing-place they reached a stream of water which fell in a sheet over a ledge twelve feet high. It presented a surface nearly unbroken, but at one side, the sheet was thin, but little water passing down. Through this they went, and Yank's spirits increased perceptibly; they were in the refuge he had sought.

He led the way along a passage for thirty yards in total darkness, and then came to a stop.

"Wait an' artom, an' we'll hev some light on the subjick," he said, cheerfully. "Thar is a torch som'ers nigh, an' when I git a blaze I'll show ye yer new home. I don't think any on ye ever lived in a bigger house, though it ain't fixed up with the best o' furnitoor. We kin get along, though, I consait, ef we hev enough ter eat; that's the main p'nt. The Yellowbirds all hev weakness fur eatin', though thar was one o' the family that fasted forty days on a wager, once. His name was Hezekiah, an' he got some renown fur his expl'ite, until 'twas found that he gorged bissell with food ev'ry night while he was fastin' days. He was sly, Hezekiah was, an' given ter levity, but he could play a base-drum so you'd think an' arthquake had got loose."

By this time the mountaineer had the torch going. He fanned it into a blaze, and looked about with considerable satisfaction. They were in a cave the extent of which the eye could not grasp; it stretched further than the torch-light penetrated; and presented a spacious, solid appearance which could not but impress the fugitives favorably.

"Hyar we be!" Yank nodded, "an' I consait we are in condition ter stand quite a siege."

CHAPTER XIX.

YANK'S EXPEDITION.

DRY wood had already been conveyed to the cave for fuel, and Yank and Border Bullet soon had a roaring fire in a niche where, the mountaineer stated, the smoke would drift away through a series of crevices above and not be likely to betray them. The cave did not look so very gloomy when the fire was thus burning, though neither of the women cared to explore the vicinity where the light faded into darkness. The roof was high, and a series of pillars, stalactites and stalagmites added to the picturesqueness of the scene.

Yank worked busily, carefully arranging the camp utensils and spreading out the blankets, and in a short time all was done for the comfort of the party that their limited means would allow. He finally paused and surveyed the scene with an air of satisfaction.

"I consait we're all ready fur housekeepin', now," he said. "You'll find fresh meat o' various kinds over yender. I don't 'magine thar is any great danger o' diskivery. The waterfall has a deceptive look, which would lead folks ter s'pose it wa'n't any use ter poke around it; an' thar ain't but one other entrance. Ef you go straight that way, Border Bullet," pointing to the rear of the cave, "it'll lead ye ter the valley whar the hosses be. It's a queer nook which

ain't likely ter 'tract attention, but ef I's you I'd bring the four-footed part o' our colony inter the cave an hour arter sunrise."

"You speak as though you were going away."

"I be."

"I need scarcely ask where."

"I consait not. Possessin' the natur' you do, you must see that it's simply unpossible fur me ter stay hyar while Agnes an' Guv'nor are in sech egregious tribulation. Newrolgy an' the weak sister wouldn't be no excuse fur me ter hang back; I've got ter go out, an' do it at once. I hate ter leave ye alone hyar, but I don't s'pose thar'll be an artom o' trouble. Cheer up, little woman!"

The last words were addressed to Inez, with a smile and a nod, and then the mountaineer added:

"I leave ye one o' the strongest arms the Body-Guard kin boast, ter look out fur ye. Border Bullet is young, but he's experienced in the ways o' border-craft, an' as brave as a lion. He'll take good keer on ye. I'd like ter speak with ye private."

The veteran turned abruptly and walked several yards away, and Inez rapidly followed.

"You have unpleasant news, Nevermiss," she said, with unexpected calmness.

"How d'y know that?"

"Your manner tells me."

"I consait you're right."

"Is it about my father?"

"Yes."

"You said he had not been injured by the Indians."

"I don't think he has, little woman, but thar are other things. I s'pose you hev a good opinion o' him, but I'm obleeged ter say I ain't got it. What should you say ef I tol' ye he was more frien'ly ter ther red insex than ter us?"

The mountaineer looked sharply at the girl, but no light fell upon her face; he found no guide there.

"Do you say so?" she asked.

"I'm compelled ter. I bev the best o' proof that he visited Storm-Cloud an' Lieutenant Nolaw yesterday an' give away the secret o' our hidin'-place. That was what brung the Injuns down onto us. Only fur that we needn't hev run away, an' thar would hev b'en no trouble—at least, not now."

Yank ceased speaking, but Inez did not answer. There was a silence of several seconds, during which she stood looking fixedly at vacancy. He tried in vain to gain some clew to her thoughts, and finally added:

"This is a pooy hard thing ter say to a child about her father, but it's true. I kep' it from ye ontill we got hyar on purpose, an' I deceived your father. I got him ter go with me on that scout on purpose ter give him the slip, an' leave him in the hills, an' I did it. I consait 'twas better than ter bev any trouble. Some would have dealt with him mortal severe, fur it wa'n't no triflin' matter ter scheme with the Injuns ter deliver up all our party, but I went light an' easy fur your sake. I hope ye don't blame me, little woman?"

The girl turned quickly and took his hand.

"Blame you?" she replied, tremulously. "Never! A mother could not show more compassion and kindness to her child than you have shown me. I have many times heard of Yank Yellowbird; of his rare gentleness and solicitude for the weak and helpless; and all that I have heard has been proven since I saw you. I thank you a thousand times for your care, your consideration, your unswerving kindness. I do not doubt the wisdom of your course in the least."

"I'm glad on't, little woman. I won't deny that sech words from your lips are pleasant ter my ears, fur I want it ter be as easy fur you as it can be. You ain't surrounded with frien's hyar as the folks of the civilized world be, an' a helpin' hand ain't amiss in sech cases. I've needed 'em, myself; I have, sure as you live. I've stood in dark an' dubious places, an' seen the ground tremblin' under my feet, an' things looked mortal bad, but I always pulled through. It's amazin'," the veteran added, meditatively, "what a heap o' tribulations the ruler o' land an' sea will show folks the way out an' when thar don't seem ter be no way left."

"I will not ask you for any further particulars now," replied Inez, "but leave all to your judgment. Once more, thank you very much!"

They went back to the fire.

"I'll go out now an' scout a bit," said Yank, in his old, cheerful manner. "I consait I may bring our lost sheep home, ef the nowrolgy don't git the best on me. The Yellowbirds are pooy skillful at lookin' up lost sheep. When my vener'ble ancestor Noah, was sailin' around at the time o' the Flood he lost his youngest son, Moses, out o' the garret winder, an' s'posed he was lost, sure; but when the rain let up he found him down by a crick among the bulrushes, playin' leap-frog with some o' the lost children o' Israel. It may be so now, fur the fam'ly pedigree must be kep' up."

Despite these cheerful remarks Yank's anxiety was very apparent. He looked carefully to his weapons and seemed reluctant to go, returning twice to give some directions after he had started. The third attempt was more suc-

cessful, and he disappeared from the sight of the trio by the fire.

It was not a cheerful trio which he left. Matters had been bad enough when the defense numbered Yank, Border Bullet, Richard Prior and Old Porcupine, but the quartette was reduced to a pair, and the non-combatants were separated and in various dangers. Small was their hope of success, with the hills swarming with Sioux and the followers of Nolaw.

Border Bullet was far from being at ease. He did not intend to sleep until Yank returned, but, despite the mountaineer's opinion, he had no confidence in the entrance to the cave. The searchers had only to pass behind the fall, as the fugitives had done, and the way was open. True, it was next to impossible to find the entrance without a light, but some one might take a fancy to use just such means.

Troubled by these thoughts he made frequent journeys to the fall, but without seeing anything suspicious.

The night wore on, and Inez and Abigail sought their blankets. The latter slept, but it is doubtful if Inez secured much rest. Quiet as she was, her mind was very busy.

Border Bullet finally began to look for Yank, but he did not come. At least three hours had passed since his departure, and morning was not far away, but he came not. Where he was the Sharpshooter could only conjecture, but he knew the veteran well enough to be aware that no peril was too great for him to dare in a good cause. His sagacity usually carried him on to success, but all roads have an ending, and it might be that the tall mountaineer would that night come to grief.

Worried by thoughts like these the young man paced to and fro, holding his rifle ready for use, and wishing in vain for Yank's return. No cowardly fears beset him, for few men were braver than he, but he wanted Yank to be the head and front of all plans for protection. His own wisdom seemed insignificant in comparison with the mountaineer's.

For the twentieth time he wandered to the entrance to watch and listen, but nothing was to be heard but the sound of falling water. The impulse to look further came over him with almost resistless force. He told himself in vain that no good could come of it, and much evil might result; the more he thought on the subject, the more he wished to look further. After all it might not be so dangerous; he was an experienced borderer; he decided to risk it.

He passed the vail of water. The little gulch beyond was deserted, and he could dimly see the water speed across the ledge and go on to the lake. He climbed the side of the gulch and gained an elevated position. The hills lay around him as though asleep, and the lake rippled quietly between its high banks.

Then the silence was broken. A stone rattled, and Border Bullet saw two men approaching. He sunk noiselessly to the earth, and they came on almost directly toward him. Even in the dim light he could see that they wore the garments of white men.

One of them paused and looked fixedly toward the lake.

"Not a sign," he muttered.

"You don't ketch Yank Yellowbird meanderin' around all night when he had time ter git ter kiver," replied a voice which made Border Bullet start—he recognized Lefferts.

"Where is that cover?"

"Now you've got me, lieutenant."

"You say you heard nothing dropped at Yank's hut?"

"Not a word."

"Strange!"

"Not a bit. The way he lured me off inter the hills an' then give me the slip shows that he suspected me; so you wouldn't ketch him lettin' on erbout any new hidin'-place he had in mind. He's a deep 'un, is Yellowbird."

"Eah! I am tired of hearing his praises sounded. Why do men make all this empty talk about him? He's only mortal."

"Possibly, possibly; but he's got the cunnin' o' the Old Nick, by Judas!"

"Change the subject," was the irritable answer. "Mention the man no more in an eulogistic vein. Where are those we seek? Have they taken to their wings and gone like birds?"

"I don't reckon so," soberly answered Old Porcupine. It ain't likely they've got that power. I'd like to know whar they be as wal as you."

"You seem to have a fancy for Agnes Prior. I'm not sure but you're in love."

"Sorter, I admit; an' ef I have a fair chance, I'll make her agree ter marry me. That woman has a history o' her own, an' it's stormy as sin, an' it's b'en the ruin o' her happiness, but she wa'n't never guilty. I can prove her innocence, but I won't, unless she marries me."

The lieutenant looked sharply at his companion.

"So you knew her o' old?"

"Yes."

"What was this story you speak of?"

"I don't keer ter tell it, Nolaw, but it was a case of elopement. She didn't elope at all, an' I could clear her ef I would, but I ain't stupid enough to do it without my reward. Let her

marry me, an' I'll prove that thar warn't no runaway on her part, but ef she won't marry me, I'll see her in Halifax afore I'll tell what I know."

"Where did she live when all this happened?"

"Never mind, lieutenant. You an' me are friends, but you must let me have one secret."

Nolaw laughed long and heartily. Lefferts could see no good reason for such mirth, so he looked at him in a surly, suspicious way. The deserter recovered his composure and let the matter drop. He did not want Lefferts to discover that he, too, knew of the old romance in Agnes Prior's life, as much as the man's ignorance amused him. Later, he hoped to worry Old Porcupine's secret from him, but there was no haste.

They remained on the spot nearly half an hour longer, exchanging opinions and discussing plans, and then moved on.

Border Bullet improved the first chance to return to the cave. He had been away so long that he was somewhat nervous, but everything seemed to be as he had left it when he reached the fire again. He sat down and devoted some time to the conversation he had just heard. He had a high opinion of Agnes, and, having gained some idea of the situation between her and Richard Prior, was naturally interested. Lefferts claimed that he could clear away the cloud upon the unfortunate lady's life, so Old Porcupine suddenly assumed new importance. Clearly, some way ought to be devised to make him speak.

The bunter was still meditating on the subject when Yank's well-known signal sounded, and then the mountaineer appeared. He came alone, and his face bore a look of disappointment.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FLIGHT OF AGNES.

JUST how Agnes Prior reached the shore, after being thrown into the water by the overturning of the canoe, she never knew. She was a fair swimmer, but she could not afterward recall making use of this useful accomplishment. That she did is not to be doubted, and she reached firm land in safety.

Pausing there for a moment, she looked back and saw Yank still fighting with his red foes. At that moment she was utterly incapable of coherent thought, and with the idea in her mind that all her friends were doomed to butchery, she turned and fled blindly. Where she was going, or where she went, she had no knowledge; only one idea was in her mind, and that was to get as far away from the whooping savages as possible.

Words can but faintly describe the horror which had settled, vulture-like, upon her.

On, on, she went; now nearly falling over some obstacle in her path—for the way was very rough—and then narrowly escaping some chasm; but rapidly hastening on, blindly, in terror, and without controlling thought except to one end—all her energies were bent to getting as far as possible away from the Sioux.

All sounds of them had died away, and, nearly exhausted, she was thinking of pausing to rest when she heard footsteps behind her. She turned her head; some one was running after her. The discovery gave her new, but fictitious strength. Again she summoned all her energies and sped forward. On! on! But the pursuer followed fast, and she could not gain a foot. New terror seized upon her. She did not doubt that it was an Indian, and she expected soon to feel his grasp.

Her endurance reached its limit, and she staggered, paused, and then dropped to the ground. She covered her face with her hands to shut out the dreaded foe. Heavy breathing sounded beside her, and then a voice broke the silence:

"Golly gwacious! we's done had a dweeful run ob it, ain't we?"

Agnes raised her head with nervous quickness. A slight, boyish figure stood beside her; the pursuer was not a hostile Indian, but the young negro, Guv'nor. The revulsion of feeling was too much for Agnes, and she burst into tears. There was no good reason for it; 'twas only the discharge of her pent-up emotions.

"Nevah run so befoah sence I lef' de Souf," added Guv'nor, puffing. "Clare ter gwacious, I t'ought my lungs would explode wid de pres-suh on dem, but I's boun' ter keep up wid you ef I run my feet clab off."

Agnes made an effort to regain her calmness.

"Where are the others?" she asked.

"Killed an' skulped!" the boy promptly answered.

"Oh! Guv'nor!"

"I did all I could ter sabe dem, but I had ter gib it up an' run."

"Did you see any one killed?"

"No."

"Then how do you know they were?"

"Dat's what de Shos were dere foah."

"I hope they escaped."

"Don't t'ink dey did. 'Speck Massa Yank an' de rest am gone coons. We-'uns is all dat's left, an' it 'pends on us ter keep up de famly pedigree."

Guv'nor used Yank's favorite expression as

glibly, and spoke as cheerfully, as though nothing serious had occurred. In fact, he considered himself the leader of the small minority which was left, and had a vague idea of accomplishing deeds that would make his fame equal to the mountaineer's.

"What are we to do now?" tremulously asked Agnes.

"I s'peck we hadn't bettah fo'ce no quarrel onto dem Shos to-night."

"Be sensible, Guv'nor."

"Suah! Ain't I?"

"We are in a position of terrible danger. Much as I hope that Yank escaped, I fear that our brave protector lost his life. Anyway, we are now separated from the others, and I dare not go back. Go back!" she reiterated, starting to her feet; "no, never; I dare not even remain here. The Sioux may be on our track—we must flee. Come, Guv'nor; come!"

"Doan' you be scared!" coolly replied the boy; "I'll take cab ob you."

"Oh! Guv'nor, you can do nothing."

"Can't it? S'peck you doan' know me. I's a pupil ob Yank Yellowbird, I is; an' he an' I doan' get lef' easy."

"Never mind; but come, come!"

Reluctantly he yielded to her entreaties, and they went on. Agnes had recovered her breath and strength somewhat, and she at once struck into a hurried walk. Guv'nor remonstrated, but all in vain.

"Whah we goin', anyhow?" the boy grumbled.

"I don't know."

"Dis way am right into the Black Hills."

"Never mind; let us get away from the Indians."

"But deir villages, an' quarterheads, am in dat direction, suah."

"They are not very near. Come on!"

"Golly gwacious! we'll git los' an' nevah find ourself ag'in any moah."

Agnes did not answer. She was still in no condition to reason, and with no idea in her mind except to get further away from the Indians, she hurried on. A stone, loosened by some natural cause, rattled down a slope and frightened her into a run, but lack of strength soon compelled her to abate her speed somewhat. Guv'nor kept close to her. The darkness, the rocks and the bushes, each of which might be the covert of a Sioux, had due effect upon him, and his heroism rapidly fled. He was as ready to flee as Agnes, and he used no more judgment. If the sky had been studded with stars neither would have thought to use that means of keeping a direct course, and as the several gulches which they traversed crossed and recrossed each other in bewildering confusion, their flight was only a wild, haphazard wandering.

Nevertheless, they kept it for an hour, now walking rapidly and then running, and until Agnes's powers of endurance were exhausted. Once more she sunk to the ground, pale, weak, nervous and trembling.

Guv'nor rocked himself to and fro on his seat upon a boulder.

"We's gone up, suah!" he moaned, disconsolately.

"I can go no further," panted Agnes.

"Nor me."

"How far do you think we are from the lake?"

"Bout fawty miles."

"Be sensible, Guv'nor. We have gone five or six miles—do you think we have gone more?"

"S'peck we must; we's run like de Old Scratch."

"And where are we? Without a roof to cover our heads, without food, without means of defense. We are alone and helpless. No doubt Yank and the others are dead, and we are alone in the heart of the Black Hills—worse than alone, for if we meet any one it will be a Sioux who is thirsty for our blood."

"Oh! golly gwacious!" lamented Guv'nor.

"I think it would have been better if we had died with the others. As well be killed outright as to starve in the hills, or be finally hunted down by the savages."

"Oh! oh! I'd done commit suicide, ef I wasn't sech a dweeful wicked niggah—I will do it, too, as soon as I's libed long enough to repent. I begin to repent now!"

Guv'nor commenced to whimper and dig his knuckles into his eyes, but the process was suddenly interrupted. A cry fell from Agnes's lips. She had looked up—a man stood not twenty feet away.

This time she did not think of flight. Her strength no longer rallied to her aid, but desperation came instead. Clasping her hands, she exclaimed:

"Kill me, if you will!"

"I don't want to!" replied a cool, deliberate voice, which was in striking contrast to her own wild utterance. "I am not in that line of business."

Her hands fell apart, and she stared at him in confusion and startled wonder. She could hardly believe the evidence of her eyes, yet—the man was Richard Prior!

"I think you recognize me," he pursued, "and you will realize that you are not in danger from me. I am not a butcher."

"I thought it was an Indian," gasped Agnes.

"Judging from your conversation, you have had a hard experience."

Agnes passed her hand over her fast-throbbing heart and tried to regain her calmness. Richard's appearance had agitated her in a new way, and she found it hard to recover coherency of thought or expression.

"Is it true," added Prior, "that harm has come to Yank and the rest?"

"They were attacked by Indians who were ten times their own number. Peter Lefferts was gone, and there were only Yank and Border Bullet to fight twenty or thirty savages."

"Great heavens!" Richard ejaculated. "And to think that I deserted the party in their hour of danger, and deprived them of one pair of arms which, insignificant though they may be, ought to have been at their service! I am a fool and a scoundrel! My desertion was contemptible, and they must think it cowardly, though, before heaven, I was not actuated by fear. If harm has come to them I shall never forgive myself: the brand of Cain will be on my brow!"

"Yank did not speak harshly of you."

"It is not his way. I can, in a measure, read the man. Brave as a lion, he is tender-hearted and forgiving; a marvel of consideration and allowance when the weakness of his fellow-men are considered. But that does not excuse me. I was foolish enough to think that I could remain near the party and be ready to give my poor aid if it was needed, but the crisis has come and passed, and I was not there. I feel myself a criminal!"

The speaker's voice was unsteady, and it was plain that he was prey to the most bitter and painful regrets.

"You did not know how it would be," replied Agnes ever ready to forgive.

"I had no right to leave the party—it was a crime."

In the midst of his keen self-reproach he had forgotten that the cause of his desertion had been the presence of the very woman to whom he was talking. He remembered it now, and a quick start followed. His thoughts turned from Yank.

"How did you escape?" he asked.

"I hardly know, except that I ran away when the attack was made on Yank and the rest."

"Have you been biding?"

"Hiding! No; we have been running as fast and far as possible."

"I don't understand fully. Where do you think you are?"

"I don't know. We went blindly, only seeking to get far away from the Sioux. I think we have come five, six or seven miles since we left the lake. Am I right?"

"In one sense, you were never further from the facts. You must have wandered in a circle, for you are not over thirty rods from Yank's camp in the gulch. All your efforts have gone for nothing; you are not five minutes' walk from where the fight with the Indians occurred!"

CHAPTER XXI.

RICHARD AND AGNES BECOME VICTIMS OF FATE.

THE revelation fell with cruel force upon Agnes's ears. She had prolonged her flight until bodily pain accompanied exhaustion, feverishly seeking to get far away from the dreaded Sioux, and now she was told that all this had been in vain; that she was but little more than a stone's-throw from Yank Yellowbird's camp. That meant, also, that she was back where the savages had lately been, and where, despite the silence that then prevailed, they were likely still to be.

She was speechless with dismay, but not so Guv'nor.

"Golly gwacious!" he lamented, "we-'uns hab fell ontah melancholy days! De fates ob wah are ag'in us, an' we'll all be skulped, suah. Oh, I's sorry, foah I ain't had time to repent! Oh, I's a dweeful wicked niggah, an' I doan' want to die. Oh! oh!"

"Be silent!" sternly replied Richard. "There must be no howling here; you will attract the attention of the Sioux, who are not likely to be far away. Not another word in that key! Madam," to Agnes, "if you will remain here, I will look about and see if I can gain any clew to the real state of affairs. I am not a practiced borderer, and no good may result from it, but I will try. Draw back into yonder bushes, and remain there until I return."

His manner was more peremptory than kind, yet not exactly harsh. He waved his hand and hastened away. Bitterly he cursed his folly in leaving Yank's hut; it had not only resulted in his absence in time of need, but the woman who had once been his wife, but whom, he assured himself, he now hated so much, was thrown upon his sole protection. And he must care for her to the best of his ability; it would be the act of a brute and a scoundrel to desert any woman under such circumstances.

Agnes saw him disappear in the darkness with many misgivings, and then reproached herself for allowing him to go. All the sorrows of her life had not crushed out her love for him, and she knew that he was going into danger. True, he would doubtless have resented advice

from her, but she felt to blame for allowing him to leave without a word.

She obeyed his directions, and, with Guv'nor, concealed herself in the undergrowth and awaited the result. It was a painful delay. Every moment she expected to hear a rifle-shot, or some other sound which would indicate that Richard had been discovered by the Sioux.

Half an hour passed without any such manifestation, and then Prior returned in safety.

"No news," he said, shaking his head. "I saw several Indians, but no signs of our friends. I am inclined to think, though, that some, if not all, of them escaped. The manner of the Sioux is not that of victors, and they are searching for somebody. It may be you and the boy, but I am more inclined to think that Yank Yellowbird baffled them somehow."

"Pray Heaven he did."

"Have you no idea where he intended to go?"

"Not in the least."

"It is singular that he dropped no words of explanation."

"I am inclined to think that he did not trust Lefferts."

Agnes looked more closely at Prior as she spoke. Was it true, as Lefferts had claimed, that he had confided in that low-minded person, and told the story of their unhappy married life?

"Possibly he intended to take to the prairie again," continued Richard, thoughtfully, still thinking of Yank.

"The start was made that way."

"Yes; but it may have been only a ruse. Water leaves no trail and the lake came in handily."

"I hope they will escape."

"Your thoughts want to be directed principally to yourself. You must contrive to evade the Sioux until you can rejoin the mountaineer's party, but how is it to be done? When I left Yank's hut I took up my quarters in a recess among the rocks, but it is very small and wholly insecure; the Sioux would find you there readily. I don't suppose you know of any cave, do you?"

"No."

"One must be found."

Richard's hands worked uneasily on the barrel of his rifle, and his manner had grown cold and stern. Fate had thrown this woman upon his protection, and for the sake of common humanity, he intended to be true to the trust. He would rather have become protector of any other woman, for it seemed a particularly severe burden to be obliged to keep the company of, and work for, the woman whom he accused of having ruined his whole life. Still, he would not desert her, and he was determined to spare no effort. Whatever else she was, she was a helpless woman surrounded with danger.

"We must not remain here," he resumed, after a pause. "We are almost side-by-side with the Indians, and day is not far distant. We must get out of their reach while we can, and look for some hiding-place when we have daylight to aid us. In my opinion it will be best for us to go down the south side of the lake, keeping well back, of course. We should be safer, no doubt, to make for the deeper intricacies of the hills, but I know nothing about that region, and our chances of finding Yank—if the brave mountaineer still lives—seemed to be best served by going as I said."

This was a logical course of reasoning, but it was a fact, unknown to Prior, that whereas he intended to go down the south side of the lake, Yank and his detachment of the "colony" had found a refuge on the north shore.

"I think you are right," answered Agnes.

She spoke timidly. She was humbly grateful to Richard for offering protection, but could not but feel that she was unworthy of it. Possessing the devoted, yielding nature that she did, she was inclined to look at their personal troubles at that moment from his point of view, rather than her own.

"Let us go at once," he said. "I will take the lead, and we must go in silence. Guv'nor, you have a voice rather shrill—you must keep perfectly still. Don't speak at all."

"Ef I see an Injun, sha'n't I tell ye?" asked the boy.

"He will be likely to 'tell' us himself."

"All right, sab; I ain't anxious ter be on familiar footin' wid no Shoo trash."

"Enough; follow me!"

Richard made the start. He was a man of more than average bravery, but he had grave fears in regard to this undertaking. With the Sioux searching the hills for the escaped whites, it would be more luck than anything if he, a novice, took his charges through successfully. All he could do was to go on and use all possible caution.

Starting, he made a wide *detour* to the left, as it would be the height of rashness to proceed near the shore of the lake. He walked on with his rifle held ready for use, and Agnes and Guv'nor followed. All possible care was used, but stray twigs would break and small stones rattle under their inexperienced feet.

For several minutes all went well; but danger was not far distant. They were passing through a gulch when Richard discovered a human

figure. It stood upon a rock eighty yards away, and on high land, and was thus shown boldly against the sky.

It was that of an Indian.

Quickly Richard led his charges to a recess among the rocks and bushes, for the Sioux's face had been turned toward them. Then he looked up again. The figure was gone.

"Not a word," he said, cautiously; "I have an idea we shall see more of this fellow. He seems to be searching."

There was a brief pause, and then Richard saw a moving figure down the gulch. It was a man, moving their way. Prior crouched down with his rifle ready for use. Another pause, and he had grasped the whole situation. Two Indians were approaching, one on each side of the gulch, and evidently making a search more or less thorough. They glided along like phantoms, their movements quiet and willowy, and he could well believe that but little escaped their keen eyes.

Agnes trembled violently, while Guv'nor's teeth actually chattered. Richard bent forward and laid a hand on his arm with a grasp which restored a measure of the boy's wits, and the chattering ceased.

Nearer came the Sioux, and Prior shut his teeth tightly as he saw the careful watch which they were bestowing upon all objects along the way. There were no large recesses, and they did not move about among the rocks, seeming to think their scrutiny sufficient. The boulder and small group of bushes which covered the fugitives approached nearest to a real covert, and all depended on whether the Indian on that side of the gulch would consider the place worth visiting.

Richard saw the rifle in the man's hand, and determined to have the first shot, if it came to that.

He could, at least, dispose of one foeman.

The Sioux came opposite the hiding-place. He looked at it fixedly. Richard's heart beat rapidly, but his manner was doggedly firm. There was a period of acute uncertainty; then the Indian's gaze wandered away, and he went on as before. A quivering sigh passed Agnes's lips, but the red warrior walked away, unconscious of the prey so near him.

Accompanied by his companion, he receded until the darkness concealed him from view.

Richard rose to his feet.

"Come!" he said, briefly; "let us go on."

They resumed their journey, but Richard soon noticed that Agnes did not follow so closely as before. He watched her, and saw that every movement betrayed physical exhaustion. He paused.

"Are you getting tired?" he asked, not unkindly.

She sunk down upon a boulder.

"I—I am not well," she faltered, nervously.

"You have overtaxed your strength."

"I think you are right."

"We will rest a moment."

"You had better go on without me."

"Go on!"

"Yes. The last vestige of my strength is gone, and it is useless to struggle further. You can do me no good by remaining. Go on, and save yourself."

"And leave you?"

"There is no other way."

"But, if you can go half a mile further, we may stop until day with a certain degree of safety."

"Useless, useless. If it was a matter of will I could do so, but only my nervous force has kept me up the last hour. I endured all that I could before I spoke at all; the collapse has come, and it is complete. My strength is gone, utterly gone; and I am ill and in physical pain."

She bowed her head upon her hands, while Richard Prior stood looking silently down upon her. His mind was the arena where conflicting emotions were fighting a battle, but he was resolved never to leave her in danger while life was left to them both. It was a duty demanded of his manhood toward any woman, and he had no right to remember the past then. They were victims of fate, but, strange as their situation was, he still had the imperative demands of duty to consider.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CAVE.

FOR several moments there was silence, but Richard was not idle. His brows were contracted in a thoughtful frown, and he was trying to discover a way out of the dilemma. He could see but one. Inexorable fate had made him the temporary protector of Agnes, but thus far he had not been obliged to so much as touch her hand. The sterner part of his nature rebelled at the idea, but he saw plainly that he must go further.

He took the decisive step with firmness. Bending forward, he spoke in a voice not without an element of kindness.

"I will carry you," he said, quietly.

Agnes started and raised her head. Even in the dim light he could see that her face bore a startled expression.

"Carry me!" she whispered, tremulously.

"Yes."

"But—but—"

"I am strong, and your weight will not tire me. It is madness to think of remaining here until day breaks, and may my right arm palsy if I desert a woman in her hour of danger. Rise, and I will carry you!"

"But—"

"Don't stop to argue. We must get away."

"It—if you will give me your arm I think I can walk."

"As you will. Rise!"

She obeyed, and put out her hand timidly, but he disregarded the motion and deliberately encircled her waist with his arm. Having decided on the step—having sacrificed his pride—he hesitated at no half-way station. For the first time in years he clasped his arm around the woman he had once sworn to love, cherish and protect. Nor was his grasp a half-hearted one; he almost lifted her clear off her feet, and the slight exertion she thereafter made was wholly forgotten by her in the confusion and memories which this situation awakened.

No more Sioux were seen, and the silence of the hills was not broken by any noise to alarm them. They went until well past the islands in the lake, and finally came to a stop where their surroundings were particularly wild. Richard judged that day was about two hours distant, and he gathered a quantity of dead grass which was convenient and made Agnes a couch. She thanked him simply and lay down. She did not think she could sleep, for her thoughts were active, but, once in a recumbent position, Nature asserted her rights, and the weary woman soon lost consciousness in slumber.

Guv'nor was asleep on the bare ground.

Prior sat down in a position where he could watch for danger, and remained in deep thought. As soon as day dawned he intended to look for a cave, or recess among the rocks, but his hopes were not great. It was only a chance in a hundred, while there was no doubt that the Sioux would be active through the day. He had a great responsibility upon him, and his lack of experience in border ways was a great impediment to success.

Never in the past had he contemplated a situation like this. He had thought never to see Agnes again, and their meeting at the outskirts of the Black Hills had seemed like a page from a fairy story, but this was nothing to the strangeness of the new complication which made him Agnes's protector.

Time wore on, and the eastern sky began to change before the sun's advance. Slowly Night drew back, like a vanquished, stubborn foe, and once more there was light around the lone watcher. Agnes and the boy still slept. Prior felt that he had a burden to bear which was beyond his strength. He must find shelter, and, also, obtain food. The one seemed as difficult as the other, for, though game was abundant, the sound of his rifle might bring the Sioux down upon them.

He improved the first gleams of day to look for a refuge, and his success surprised and delighted him. He saw a fissure in a cliff which seemed to be no more than that, but, entering, he was surprised to find that it soon widened into a vacancy which was too dark to admit of examination without a light.

Returning to the outer world he first secured several pine knots, and then awoke Agnes and Guv'nor, and bade them follow him. Not until they were well in the fissure did he attempt to get a light. When he did so the pine-wood readily caught and they went on.

The space beyond was like a corridor, being only about ten feet wide, and they advanced eighty yards without any change. Then Richard suddenly paused. He had discovered two pairs of gleaming eyes in the darkness in front, and thoughts of ferocious animals rushed upon him. He handed the torch to Guv'nor, and held his rifle ready for use.

The owners of the eyes advanced, and a great feeling of relief swept over Prior as he recognized them to be elk. More than that, he saw the coveted food in his very grasp if he could make a successful shot.

He did not think then of the danger which might follow the shot, but took careful aim and fired. The report almost deafened him, but in another moment one of the animals lay prostrate on the floor and the other had bounded away. Richard seized the torch and advanced. The trophy of his skill, lured to ruin by the light, was a female, and his shot had been wonderfully successful for one so little practiced in hunting.

Further investigation showed that the cave proper was about twice the size of a common room. A passage led from it at two points. The second one—that used by the elk—led to a small, narrow gulch.

As they could hardly expect to find anything better, they decided to remain. Guv'nor was sent for dry grass to make couches, while Richard went to an elevated point to make a survey of their surroundings. Not a human being could be seen. The lake, which was not over seventy rods away, was as calm and placid as ever. Near the east end he saw a faint column of smoke rising, and knew that it was that of the Sioux; wherever Yank was, if living, he would not build a fire so openly.

Returning to the cave, Richard blocked up the narrower passage with loose rocks, and then rejoined his companions in danger. He could not banish from his face the gloomy expression which had settled upon it. There was no safety in their position, and he knew it. Their trail led to the cave without disguise, nor did he know how to hide it. He could not have followed it, but he knew it would not baffle the Indians if they once chanced upon it. There was absolutely nothing to prevent their discovering the party except—luck.

On luck, and Providence they must depend wholly.

On the other hand they had the elk for food, with wood and water in the gulch. All these were called into use, and they had such a breakfast as their means permitted.

While eating, Richard had been thinking, and he had come to a conclusion. He soon made this known.

"I think I will now go and look for Yank."

"Go out?" echoed Agnes.

"Yes."

"The Sioux will see you."

"I must take my chances."

"But you don't know where to look for Yank."

"True—he may be at the bottom of the lake."

"Don't you know that the hills are full of Indians?" asked Agnes, her voice trembling and her expression troubled.

"That is true, but I can see no other hope. Menaced as our friends must be, if alive, there is no hope that Yank will find us. Even if he could leave his party, which he cannot, would he, one man, be as likely to find us as all the lynx-eyed savages? No; the one chance is for me to go out at once, and try to run upon the mountaineer. Every moment of delay makes the matter worse. Suppose that we could remain here safely for several days—which is not likely to be the case—what then? Would we be any better off at the end of three days, or a week? No. I must go now!"

"Don't, don't!" Agnes exclaimed.

"Of course you dislike to stay alone, but—"

"It was not of that I was thinking."

"What do you mean?"

"It is the danger which you will risk."

A cloud appeared on Richard's face.

"That is nothing."

"It is something; it is everything. I will not allow you to go out and risk your life for me."

She spoke with agitation, and he mildly answered:

"It is best for us all."

"How can you gain by it?"

"I am no frontiersman, nor am I capable of protecting you from the Sioux. I trust that I am not lacking in courage, but what will my plans avail against the experienced, wily foe who has studied border-craft all his life?"

"You certainly would not be in more danger to remain here than to go out?"

"No, but—"

"Then remain! You think only of me when you speak of going to look for Yank, and I know that your danger would be more than doubled. You shall not take this rash step for me. I forbid your going!"

Richard passed his hand uneasily across his forehead. Her agitation and vehemence moved him more than he would have admitted. If she had loved him sincerely she could not have manifested more feeling. If she loved him!—that was his mental form of expression. Here was another complication arising from their new, strange association. He could not feel bitterly toward her then, for the common danger was the all-absorbing subject of thought, but he rallied to meet her objection.

"This is madness!" he protested.

"Call it what you will, I insist!" she affirmed, her usual meekness giving place to emphasis, force and dormant dignity. "You once told me that I had been the evil genius of your life—you shall not go out to meet death for me now."

Richard's face flushed. Some quick retort trembled on his lips, but he repressed it and calmly replied:

"Don't let us speak of the past."

"Then don't make it necessary."

"But it is suicide for us to remain here. Our trail leads straight to this cave, and an Indian can follow it unerringly if he once finds it—and he is likely to do so."

"If such a thing occurs," Agnes interrupted, "we must endure it, but it would be worse than suicide for you to go out; it would be criminal. Now, Richard, let us say no more about it. Remain here, and let us trust to the Divine Power that watches over the weak and helpless even in the wilderness."

Prior did not answer. Her persistent opposition had had due effect, for he had all along had grave doubts if he ever returned alive from the undertaking. For the time, too, he was softened toward Agnes. Later, doubts might come, but at that moment he did not doubt that she was wholly sincere in the reasons advanced, nor that her motives were purely unselfish.

He yielded, and thus the day began. One of his revolvers he gave to Agnes; with the other, and his rifle, he kept watch over the main entrance, expecting every moment to see the enemy

appear. If such a thing occurred it meant doom to the fugitives, but he was determined to sell his life as dearly as possible.

CHAPTER XXIII.

STORM-CLOUD'S THREAT.

THE camp of the allies was a short distance east of Yank's old hut in the gulch. A valley thirty rods square furnished ample accommodations, and there they had settled down, the Sioux on one side and the deserters on the other. The dog had passed without any capture, or, indeed, any clew to the fugitives. Storm-Cloud was almost positive that they were hiding somewhere north of the lake, and his warriors had done their best to find some trace, but they had failed.

Storm-Cloud was greatly disappointed, but not a word of blame did he speak to his followers. When Lieutenant Nolaw complained, the chief stolidly answered, "Nevermiss is there!" and Nolaw ground his teeth and gave his views emphatically at having that name always flung in his face.

He had not learned to have that respect for Yank Yellowbird's prowess which bitter experience had fixed in the minds of the Sioux.

When night came again huge fires were lighted in the double camp. There was no longer need of secrecy on the part of the allies, and the flames were made to lap the wood until the valley was almost as light as day. Storm-Cloud and Nolaw were in consultation. The deserter was impatient and fiery. He had become as much interested in the case as the chief, and a desire to prove his zeal was mixed with unreasoning hatred of Yank Yellowbird.

He now demanded an "active campaign," as he called it, and urged Storm-Cloud to put forth every effort. He was listened to with grave attention. The Sioux had not lost the belief that it was a very good thing to have allies who wore the blue uniforms of United States soldiers, deserters though they were, and he flattered Nolaw's vanity judiciously, but it was a fact that the lieutenant was nearly as ignorant of border-craft as a child, and Storm-Cloud knew it.

They were still talking when there was a slight stir at one side of the valley, and as the chief's attentive eyes looked for the cause, he arose to his feet with more celerity than he usually exhibited under such circumstances.

He saw that some of his warriors were bringing in a prisoner.

He stood in an eager attitude, stoicism forgotten, and then his eyes lighted up as he recognized Border Bullet.

Straight to the chief the captive was led. He had evidently seen hard usage, for his clothes were soiled and torn, and there was a red spot on one temple which could be attributed only to one cause, but his movements showed unimpaired strength, and his bearing was firm, bold, and even defiant.

He was halted in front of Storm-Cloud, and the chief's lip curled with a slight, cruel smile.

"What have we here, Fighting Wolf?" he asked, slowly.

"We captured the pale-face near the north shore of the lake," was the reply. "He is one who goes with Nevermiss."

"I know," was the steady reply. "It is the wolf that follows the bear, and helps to eat what the strong animal slays."

Border Bullet heard this uncomplimentary comment without a word, but his gaze met that of the Sioux firmly.

"You have done well," added the chief, addressing his followers. "This man has shared the hut of Nevermiss for ten moons, and the red-men owe him no good will. His rifle has never been idle when we fought Nevermiss, and his aim was deadly. There has been mourning in the Sioux villages when the Sharpshooter looked through the sights. White dog, Storm-Cloud has sought you in vain in the past. He is now glad that you have come to him. You are welcome!"

The speaker's voice was hard, cold, cruel and gloating, but Border Bullet did not waver.

"Pray, go on," he coolly directed.

Storm-Cloud turned to his warriors.

"Was the Sharpshooter alone when you captured him?"

"Yes. We were lying in ambush, as the chief commanded, and the white dog walked into the trap. He fought well for a white man, but we overcame him."

"Prisoner," proceeded the chief, "where did you come from?"

"I decline to say."

"Where is Nevermiss?"

"I decline to say."

"The pale-faces are hiding like hares in a hole in the ground. The Sharpshooter came out of his burrow and was captured. Nevermiss and the others are still there. Where is the secret place?"

"You will never learn from me, Storm-Cloud."

"Let not the pale-face speak so hastily. What the Sioux wants to know, he learns. Speak, Border Bullet! Where is Nevermiss?"

"Chief, we need waste no words. I am your prisoner, and wholly in your power, but you

have not got your hands on Yank Yellowbird, and I don't think you will. I shall not aid you. Don't waste words, for all your efforts will be as nothing. I utterly refuse to give you a point!"

"My ears are open, and I hear you. The Sharpshooter is experienced in border life for one so young."

"Well?"

"He knows the ways of the red-men."

"Somewhat."

"The Sioux are now on the war-path, and Storm-Cloud has sworn to kill Nevermiss. The Sharpshooter knows where the white fox is. Do you think I will be satisfied when he says that he will not speak?"

"I really don't know how you are going to help yourself, chief," coolly replied Border Bullet.

"Torture will make the white man speak."

"I doubt it."

"When the flames are blistering his flesh he will cry out like a sick papoose."

"That is a matter of opinion. I may, and I may not, but of one thing you can rest assured—however loud I may cry out, my cries will not take the shape of words to reveal the whereabouts of Nevermiss. You may depend upon that."

"Wait, Border Bullet," persuasively replied the chief. "Listen to the words of one who is older than you. You are young, brave and skillful; life is dear, and to the young it is long; why should you throw it away?"

"I haven't done so yet," the prisoner calmly answered.

"You will tell where Nevermiss is, or die."

"Be that as it may, I shall not tell where he is."

The two men gazed fixedly at each other. Storm-Cloud was angry and threatening; Border Bullet was calm, firm, and defiant. He possessed a nature too strong and bold to be cowed, and though well aware that he was in great danger, he had neither the look nor the feeling of a coward. The chief glared at him as though hoping to frighten him in that way, but the attempt was a failure. The prisoner did not waver, and Storm-Cloud was forced to give it up. He turned to Fighting Wolf.

"Send Mountain Eagle here," he ordered.

For the first time Border Bullet felt like starting. The sound of that name reminded him that there was one in the Sioux camp who was not hostile to him, and he felt increased interest. Before Storm-Cloud could again look at him his face had grown impassive.

Mountain Eagle appeared.

The young chief had never looked more impressive. His tall, muscular, graceful and supple figure was far more attractive than that of Storm-Cloud, or, indeed, of any of the Indians near at hand, and his face seemed in every way a warrior's. He advanced, but looked only at Storm-Cloud. If Border Bullet had been miles away he could not have been more unconscious, outwardly.

"You see this pale-face prisoner?" continued Storm-Cloud, pointing to Border Bullet.

Mountain Eagle changed his regard. He and the hunter looked straight at each other, but not a muscle moved in way of recognition or understanding. The young chief answered in the affirmative.

"Does my brother know him?"

"It is the Sharpshooter."

"You say well. Listen to me, Mountain Eagle. He was taken by Fighting Wolf at a point which shall be shown you. Take a score of warriors and let the Wolf lead you to where the capture was made, and then look for Nevermiss. Search two hours by Black Fox's watch," and he pointed to Nolaw, "and then return to camp."

"The chief shall be obeyed."

Mountain Eagle withdrew. Not again did he look at the Sharpshooter, and the latter would almost have doubted that he had seen aright had he not been prepared for just such caution on the part of his red ally. Storm-Cloud's eyes were keen, and no signal would have passed unnoticed by him.

He turned coldly to Border Bullet.

"When Mountain Eagle comes again he may bring Nevermiss. If he does not, the Sharpshooter will be tortured until he tells the secret of the mountaineer's refuge."

Then, turning to Border Bullet's remaining captors, he added:

"Take him to yonder cliff, and guard him well."

So saying, the chief walked deliberately back to his position by the fire. He seemed to forget the hunter entirely, but the latter was well aware that he was not forgotten. He was led to the designated place, which was a low cliff with scattered bushes along its base, and ordered to sit down. He did this without a word, and the Sioux disposed of themselves near him. He was not bound, nor did there seem to be any need of it. The Sioux were on three sides of him, the cliff was on the fourth, and any attempt to gain the bushes would result in prompt detection.

Realizing this, the Sharpshooter settled down quietly and gave the matter no further thought.

There were other subjects to occupy his time. Cool as he was outwardly, he felt greatly chagrined and troubled over his capture. One more member of the "Body-Guard" was lost to the defense, and, without overestimating his importance, he knew that the loss was serious. Yank had no aid left.

It was an unlucky impulse which had led him to venture from the cave, and the way he was captured did not, in his opinion, add luster to his reputation.

Such thoughts were occupying his mind when a moving object chanced to attract his attention. It was near the cliff, and half-concealed by the bushes, but he thought at first that it was some animal of the cat kind. It pushed further forward, however, and Border Bullet knew the truth.

It was Yanks dog, Moses.

The gaunt canine was evidently on an investigating errand, and he did not seem pleased at the scene presented to his gaze. Only his head and shoulders were visible, but he was looking on the Sioux camp with gleaming eyes and parted lips. Savage enough he looked at that moment, for he shared his master's antipathy to the red-men, and regarded them as his natural enemies.

"Faithful Moses!" thought the hunter. "He knows I am here and in trouble, and his will is good enough to fly to my rescue. I hope he won't try it. Clearly, Yank is not near, or Moses would not be in such a prominent position. I only wish that the dog had the gifts of reason and speech, in addition to his marvelous instinct, and he would quickly notify his master. As it is, he and I are equally helpless."

CHAPTER XXIV.

OLD PORCUPINE REAPPEARS.

BORDER BULLET continued to regard the dog with friendly interest, and it suddenly occurred to him that when Moses returned to the cave he might try to induce Yank to follow him. The young man had seen evidence in the past of the dog's sagacity, and such an act would be very much like him. Several times he was sure that the animal's gaze was upon him, and it was plain that Moses was considering the situation to the best of his mental ability.

Then the hunter had another idea. Knowing Moses as he did, he felt sure that if any object was conveyed to him in a way to attract attention, the dog would carry it to Yank without delay. Was it possible to send a note? He had a pencil in his pocket and, he thought, a scrap of paper. Was there any hope that he could write a note, unseen by the Sioux, and get it into the dog's possession?

His decision was soon made. Failure would not make matters any worse for him. He looked about for the articles needed to carry out his plan and then worked promptly.

First he searched for the piece of paper and found it. Then he took his pencil and wrote as follows:

"FRIEND YANK:

"I am a prisoner in the hands of the allies, whose camp is a little east of your hut in the gulch. Use every effort in the way of self-protection, for the enemy is resolved to find you. Moses has found the camp, and though I cannot escape, I have a plan for making him my messenger."

"BORDER BULLET."

One step was taken, and he went about the next. Soft, pliable grass was plentiful, and he secured a supply of this. First, he fastened the note to several blades, using other pieces as strings, and then he proceeded to make a ball of the same article. All worked well, but the ball was so light that he knew he could not cast it even the short distance to where the dog stood. He conquered this difficulty by thrusting a small stone inside, and then all was ready for the most important part of the plan.

He had worked as secretly as possible, and none of the Indians had seemed to notice him. It was so near an impossibility for him to escape that close espionage seemed unnecessary. But would the casting of the ball pass unnoticed?

He wasted no time before trying.

With accurate aim he cast the ball, but the stone fell out when half its flight was completed, and the ball fell five feet short. Border Bullet looked anxiously. Moses had made a start—what would he do about the matter next? The question was soon solved.

The dog moved promptly forward, seized the ball in his mouth, and then turned and disappeared in the bushes. The prisoner's hopes took an upward flight. The ready notice of the animal, and his prompt disappearance from the scene, satisfied Border Bullet that he fully understood what was wanted of him. During his association with the mountaineer he had seen many instances of Moses's intelligence, and he and Yank had often sent messages back and forth by the same messenger.

The hunter was almost positive that Moses now understood that he was to carry the ball of grass to his master, and would do so if such a thing lay in his power.

There was also cause for hope in the way the animal took his departure. He made no headlong, noisy rush; not a sound betrayed his re-

treat, and no Indian seemed aware of his movements.

"Noble Moses!" thought the Sharpshooter. "I have seen many instances of his rare sagacity, and if he does this errand well, he may be rated almost the equal of a human being."

Speculations were soon interrupted. A man approached, and Border Bullet, looking up, recognized Old Porcupine. That erratic individual manifested no awkwardness at this meeting under changed circumstances, but spoke in his old manner.

"Hellow, young man! Got inter a blamed fix, ain't ye?"

"Apparently, I have," coolly replied the hunter.

"We all have our ups an' downs."

"They are to be expected."

"Yas, but ev'ry man's last 'down' is bound ter come, sooner or later."

"I trust that mine is far away."

"I wouldn't, ef I's you. Trust is a poor paymaster. Better give up all hope."

"I am far from doing that."

"Shows yer folly. Best thing you kin do is ter compose yer mind an' prepare fur the journey over the dark river. A man's accounts need overhaulin' on sech 'casions, an' it's best ter do some repentin'. I should, ef I's in your place, an' you need it bad. Wish I had a flyleaf from a book o' sermons, an' I'd give ye a select readin'. Parsons git some stirrin' words an' sentences inter their effusions, fur they kin make statements until the cows come home an' nobody kin disprove 'em. I'm some on an argyment, I be; but I don't keer ter tackle a parson. They're too unscrupulous, an' they won't stick ter logic an' facts."

"You are talking nonsense, man."

"Storm-Cloud 'll speak sense ter ye bime-by, an' do it with fiery eloquence. Hope you'll like bein' burnt at the stake, though it'll prob'ly give give ye a lively sweat."

"Lefferts, I depend upon you to help me to escape," replied Border Bullet, as seriously as though he really expected to move the wretch to pity.

"You do? Better not. Quit it! You'll create fur all o' me. Me save ye! Why, I'd gladly light the fire."

"I don't doubt you, Lefferts; I know just what a villain you are. Perhaps you would like to go back to Yellow River?"

"Why not?"

"Somebody is wanted there for robbing the store."

"I can't very well fail ter see that you mean ter insinuate that I did it. That's a lie! I did nothin' o' the kind. I'm honest, but I ain't a hypocrite. I hear you was arrested fur that job!"

"And proved the best of *alibis*. Lefferts, I believe you deliberately turned suspicion upon me in that case, knowing me to be innocent all the while."

"Why should I?"

"That I don't know. You puzzle me. You hate me, but why you do so I don't know."

Old Porcupine chuckled in high glee.

"Puzzle ye, eh? Jest what I like ter do. I'm a deep 'un, I be; an' that's why they call me the Lost Link from Locust. Mighty few like me, you see, an' I'm a good 'un. I'm honest, but I ain't no hypocrite."

"Honest! And you tried to deliver your own daughter into the hands of the savages, with Yank's party."

"You're mighty interested in Inez, ain't ye?" growled Lefferts, scowling.

"What of it?"

"You can't hev her."

"No!"

"No. I separated ye once, an' I'll do it again."

"I suppose you refer to the episode at Yellow River?"

"I do, my bully boy. You are nigh enough ter the end o' yer rope so I needn't hesitate ter speak plain. I fixed it, an' I fixed it wal."

"How?"

"Never mind how."

"If I am 'near the end of my rope,' why do you hesitate to speak plainly?"

"You may twist out yet."

"Then let me ask why you did it. Whence springs this hatred? Did I ever injure you?"

"Bah! don't turn parson. As fur my motive, I ain't ready ter tell it yet. Possibly when you stand at the stake with fiery flames playing leap-frog over your shanks, I'll happen along an' whisper it in your ears. An' won't it be sweet music? You bet it will. Why will it? Because it will!"

"You talk like a weak-minded person, Lefferts. Your fancied humor is only a species of idiocy. Mental weakness and brutality seem to reign within you, and many better men than you have made the acquaintance of the hangman."

Lefferts stared at the plain-spoken hunter in angry amazement.

"See hyar!" he cried, "d'ye know you're a pris'ner?"

"Yes."

"An' goin' ter go under?"

"Well?"

"You crow loud for sech a chap."

"Don't concern yourself about me," calmly replied the Sharpshooter. "You mind your own affairs, and I'll do the same."

All this was desperately irritating to Old Porcupine. He doubled up a huge fist and half-raised it, but dropped it again and laughed shortly and unmusically.

"Go on, youngster; I've got another word for ye. I notice you've lost yer fancy fur Inez, an' got yer eye on Agnes Prior."

"Do you object?" asked Border Bullet, willing to let the mistake go uncorrected if he could draw Lefferts out.

"Not a bit, but I want ter say I have the pretty Agnes under my thumb, too. Do ye know, she was once Dick Prior's wife. A divorce cruelly separated them, but Prior thought it best. You see, his wife had eloped with another man."

"What is that to me?"

"Simply this: she never did elope. Appearances was ag'in' her, an' her husband got the divorce easy, but she was as innocent as a lamb. I know it; I kin prove it; I'm the only one who kin. But I don't do it. Why not? Because I'm goin' ter have some fun. I'm honest, but I ain't a hypocrite. I've b'en slighted an' scorned, an' I'll get even with them that have done it. Won't it be consolin' ter you when Storm-Cloud ties ye ter the stake ter know that a cloud will be left on Agnes's life which I could lift, but won't. And her future life will be jolly, won't it? Ha! ha! Old Porcupine comes up at the top every time, don't he?"

The scoundrel laughed boisterously, and then, adding a few words which were intended to be very cutting, turned and walked away.

Border Bullet did not try to detain him. He had at last seen Lefferts as he really was, and it was not a pleasant picture.

On the other hand, the "Lost Link" was no small factor in the drama going on then, and the drama of the past. He boasted that he could clear Agnes Prior; there was the secret of his enmity toward Border Bullet; and the uncertainty about the affair at Yellow River. If Peter Lefferts could be made to speak, a good deal of darkness would be cleared away, and, if his claims were veracious, several hearts would be made lighter.

The prisoner's thoughts wandered to other matters. Where was the dog, Moses? Had he carried the message to Yank? Border Bullet scoured the environs of the camp, but there were no signs of the mountaineer.

The general aspect of the allies' camp had not changed, except that some of the soldier outcasts had lain down. Not so the Sioux. They remained wide-awake, and, hemmed in by them, the prisoner's chances of seeing another day dawn seemed small.

CHAPTER XXV.

BOUND TO THE STAKE.

TIME wore on, and Storm-Cloud glanced frequently toward the northwest. It was already past the time set for Mountain Eagle's return, but the young chief did not come. Storm-Cloud was not disposed to delay any great time. He had great faith in the efficacy of argument by means of fire, and believed that he could force Border Bullet to tell where Nevermiss was, but if Mountain Eagle came in due time with a report, he was willing to wait.

That person did not return, and the Sioux leader became impatient. He spoke to one of his warriors, and preparations of an ominous nature were made. Warriors began to appear from the darkness beyond the camp, each bearing an armful of dry wood, and each deposited his burden near a stout sapling which grew in the valley.

No one could be at a loss to understand what that meant.

When the pile had grown large, Storm-Cloud arose and walked deliberately to where Border Bullet sat.

"The pale-face has had time for thought," the chief slowly, coldly said. "Will he now tell where Nevermiss is?"

The Sharpshooter looked the Indian unflinchingly in the face.

"No!" he replied.

"Is he so disgusted with life?"

"My life is in the hands of Providence."

"It is in the hands of Storm-Cloud!" sharply retorted the chief. "It is for him to say what shall be done with the white man. Do not be hasty. You are young, and the future years have much for you if you are wise. The fox, the wolf, the eagle and the deer protect their lives. They are the inferiors of man, but the Master of Life has given them instinct, and instinct is never false to wisdom; it is the voice of Nature. Why should thinking man be less wise than a creature of instinct? Be not hasty, Border Bullet, but speak out; tell where Nevermiss is, and save your own life."

"Chief, you talk well. Reform your fellows and make them law-abiding citizens, and you could gain a good living as a lawyer, for you are ingenious and plausible, and veracity is not necessary in a lawyer. You talk to me in vain, however. I am well aware that your promise goes for nothing. You are on the war-path; I

am your prisoner; and if such a thing lies in your power, you will kill me anyway. That does not count, though. One thing only I have to say—under no circumstances will I tell you where Yank Yellowbird is."

"Blind fool!" harshly retorted the chief, "you have sealed your own doom!"

"Perhaps."

"Do you think you can escape?"

"I am not without hope."

"You are not bound. Try it, if you wish."

"Never mind."

Storm-Cloud smiled grimly.

"Empty talk," he said, tersely, and then signed to his men to approach.

"Take the prisoner and bind him to the stake," he ordered. "When the fire eats into his flesh, it will be rare sport for the red-men to hear him cry out like a frightened wolf."

"If your red cut-throats wait for that, it may be a long time before they will have any 'rare sport'!" Border Bullet retorted, unwaveringly.

"We will see."

The chief waved his hand, and his men proceeded to obey his order. The prisoner was led to the stake and firmly bound, and then the Sioux began to pile the fagots around him.

It was at this moment, when the attention of all was centered upon him, that Mountain Eagle reappeared. The young chief was beside his superior before any one knew of his return. He cast one glance at Border Bullet, and some uneasiness was manifest, but when he met Storm-Cloud's gaze his face was as impassive as ever.

"I am here, great chief," he observed. "The time when I was to return is past, but I had found signs of the wily pale-face, Nevermiss, and I stayed longer. I was baffled for the time, but when the light of day again comes I hope to find him."

"What signs did you find?" asked Storm-Cloud.

"I lighted a torch, and found his footprints near where the Sharpshooter was captured."

"Then we are on the track, and Nevermiss shall be ours. Take the prisoner away—stay! the best way is to force him to speak. Pile the fagots higher!"

"Why not wait until Nevermiss is taken," suggested Mountain Eagle, "and burn both at once?"

"We may not get Nevermiss."

"Wait until the sun is over our heads to-morrow. Then, if Mountain Eagle does not bring the white mountaineer, let Border Bullet be tortured. It will be greater glory to the Sioux to beat Nevermiss by their own wits than by means of a confession of one of his companions."

It was a potent argument, and Storm-Cloud hesitated.

"Does Mountain Eagle feel sure of his clew?" he asked.

"There is great hope, chief."

"Then it shall be so. Take the prisoner back. Bind him, hand and foot, and tie him to yonder pointed rock. There let him stay until morning."

The chief waved his hand and walked away, while Mountain Eagle proceeded to see the last orders obeyed. He did not give Border Bullet a friendly look or sign, but told the warriors to bind him securely. This was done. The prisoner's ankles and wrists were duly cared for, and then he was secured to the rock—the latter being a cone-shaped affair very suitable for the occasion.

When all was done, he was left alone, though the Sioux were only a few yards away. His position was still near the cliff, and the savages were on three sides of him, but he was further east than before.

He tried his bonds and found them so secure that it was an utter impossibility for him to break, or slip them off. He tried but once. Then he again looked for Mountain Eagle, but the young chief was not to be seen. For awhile he had great doubts as to the red-man. No one had seemed more anxious to prevent an escape than he, and he had not given the prisoner one reassuring glance. Then Border Bullet remembered that he owed the postponements of the torture to him, and that Yank Yellowbird had emphatically guaranteed him to be thoroughly trustworthy.

The hunter decided to suspend judgment.

Many of the Sioux had sought their blankets, and others were following their example. At the end of half an hour only a score remained astir, and all the deserters had lain down. The fires began to diminish, and the valley was not so light as before. Midnight had passed, and the camp promised to be one of quiet repose the rest of the night.

Border Bullet was not drowsy, but the prospect of a trying day on the morrow led him to decide to sleep. The better his bodily condition was, the better he could meet whatever fate had in store for him. He assumed a position as easy as possible, closed his eyes and tried to compose his mind to slumber. At the end of another half-hour, however, he seemed as far from sleeping as ever.

Suddenly his eyes unclosed. The rope which bound him to the rock seemed to have tightened—or was it fancy? He turned his head, but nothing unusual was to be seen. He adopted the

latter theory, and was about to settle down again, when distinct words reached his ears.

"Hullo, thar—bullo! I say, be ye awake?"

Border Bullet started. He recognized that voice, and a new thrill of hope went over him.

"Quiet, lad, quiet!" added the voice, warningly. "Don't be rash, or the atrocious red insex will drop on ye like a two-hundred pound widder on a tender corn. I'm goin' ter cut ye loose, but you've got ter be sly as the serpent."

"I understand, Yank, and you can rely upon upon me. I will do nothing rash. Proceed your own away."

The Sharpshooter was not perfectly calm, but his spirits had taken a great upward bound. In some way Yank Yellowbird had entered the camp, and there certainly was hope. And there was danger, too. The Sioux were only a few yards away, and some of them were fully awake. It seemed almost impossible to leave the camp unseen, but he trusted in Yank; he knew his honest friend's faculty for getting out of "egregious tribulations."

Border Bullet sat perfectly still, watching the Indians anxiously, while the mountaineer's knife was drawn across his bonds. First the rope which secured him to the rock was cut, and then those upon his ankles and wrists received attention. Yank kept as much as possible in the cover of the rock, only his head, shoulders and one arm being exposed.

The last necessary stroke of the knife was made, and the hunter was free from bonds.

"Now, foller me," Nevermiss continued. "Do as I do, an' be as cautious as you kin. Don't make a sound louder than a cricket's jump. Of course ef we're diskivered it must be a matter o' legs an' bullets, but we don't want that way."

He slipped a revolver into Border Bullet's hand, and, turning, began to crawl toward the bushes which fringed the foot of the cliff. Escape by such a course would have seemed an impossibility to a novice. They must go within a few feet of the nearest Sioux, and though these particular warriors were supposed to be asleep, they were men always on the alert and easily aroused.

Yank set the example, however, and the younger man followed. Their advance was skillful, and that of Yank lacked but little of being marvelous. The fifty years which had passed over his head did not appear to have robbed his joints of one particle of their old-time freedom, and he moved along more like a cat than a man. Experienced as Border Bullet was, he could not equal skill like that.

Their cover was wholly inadequate. The bushes were thin and detached, and in many places there were gaps where no cover was to be found for a yard. And, at times, less than eight feet separated the white men and the sleeping Sioux, while those who were not sleeping were dangerously near.

Discovery seemed almost certain, but foot after foot was successfully passed—the extremity of the camp was reached. Not yet did Yank pause. He secured his rifle which he had left concealed under a shelving rock, and went on with more speed. He then assumed an upright position, and a place of safety was soon reached.

Then Moses abruptly appeared, and leaped upon them with dog-manifestations of joy quite unlike his usual dignified manner.

"He's the one that did it," explained Yank. "He brought the note you writ."

"Noble Moses!" exclaimed Border Bullet, rewarding the animal with several caresses of his hand. "It was asking a good deal of his intelligence, but I hoped he would do it. Moses, old fellow, you lack but little of human wisdom."

"He's an egregious good dog!" quoth the mountaineer, his face beaming with gratified pride. "Thar is a heap o' sense in a dog's head, ef he's big enough fur it ter roost thar. These condemn'd little canines which ain't bigger nor a rat I hate like hurley—they're a disgrace ter the name o' dog, an' between me an' you, Border Bullet, the woman who keeps one an' pets it more than she would a baby, is atrocious weak-minded. But when you come ter good, big dogs, with muskle an' moral character ter correspond. I vow I like 'em. I'd give more for Moses than fur a regiment o' some men."

He patted the bony head of his favorite, and then added:

"Yes, Moses brought your letter straight ter the cave, an' I read it 'thout delay—or, at least, Inez read it; I hadn't got my specks along, an' Miss Longtalker wouldn't lend me hern—an' then sot out ter find ye. Moses was leadin' me direckly back, but we run on ter Mountain Eagle, an' be an' I talked it over. We consailed nothin' could be did until late at night, so we hung 'round the camp an' he delayed gittin' back until old Storm-Could set out ter burn ye. I knewed it would hurt ye wu'ss than the malignant newrolgy ter be burnt at the stake, so the Eagle went forrun an' stopped the exercises afore the doxology was sung."

"He used great skill in doing it."

"No doubt; he's wily, the Eagle is."

"But what if Storm-Cloud had insisted upon going on?"

"Then," answered Yank, contracting his brows and tapping his rifle with four angular

fingers, "Mountain Eagle an' I would 'a' sailed in an' fit the 'ull egregious crowd—we would, by hurley!"

Border Bullet grasped his hand.

"Mountaineer, your courage is sublime!" he exclaimed.

"Land o' Goshen! that wouldn't b'en nothin'. D'y'e s'pose I'd see a frien' roasted by the red insex as though he's only a slice cut from a buff'ler's carcass! Not much, I wouldn't, ef the weak sister was ever so bad skeered. Fightin' will occur, now an' then, an' my left foot goes whar I do, skeer or no skeer. None o' the Yellowbirds ever did back out when their duty p'nted ter a scrimmage, an' I've got ter keep up the fam'ly pedigree. But this ain't ter the pint. Inez an' Miss Longstriker are alone in the cave; the sooner we git back, the better."

CHAPTER XXVI.

MILITARY MANEUVERS.

THE entrance to the cave was reached without adventure. Yank and Border Bullet passed behind the waterfall, and then went on toward the interior.

"I consait Inez an' the fair temp'rance orator will be asleep," observed the mountaineer, "so we will be sort o' quiet an' not wake 'em up. They need rest."

Acting on this idea, the men went forward as silently as possible, but when near the inhabited part of the cave Yank stopped so abruptly that the hunter nearly collided with him. Yank made a gesture to enjoin silence, and stretched out one hand with the index finger extended. Border Bullet looked, and then an expression of startled surprise appeared on his face.

The dying blaze of the fire dimly revealed Inez and Abigail sleeping on their blankets—and it revealed more. Only a few feet from the women were two men, who wore blue uniforms, and one of the pair Border Bullet remembered having seen at the deserters' camp. He was not the only person who was surprised; the manner of the soldier-outcasts indicated wonder, uncertainty, timidity and doubt. The Sharpshooter realized as clearly as though it had been orally explained that they had found the cave by chance; had come upon the sleepers; and were then hesitating whether or not to advance. The women looked like easy prey, but they might have defenders back in the dark, and the deserters had learned to fear Yank Yellowbird from the tales they had heard of his prowess.

The latter nodded to Border Bullet.

"Wait!" he said, briefly.

Still the deserters hesitated. They peered all about like some wild fowl timidly reconnoitering and then consulted. They were very much afraid, but the rich prize almost in their grasp presented a temptation not to be resisted. Evidently they decided not to resist, for they carefully deposited their muskets on the rocky floor, and then stole forward with all the caution they could command.

A humorous smile overspread Yank's face. The way in which they abandoned their principal weapons impressed him as being very comical. He comprehended that they had decided to seize the sleepers—probably to check outcries by placing their hands upon the women's mouths—and they feared that some rattle of the muskets against the rocks would betray them prematurely.

It amused the mountaineer, however, to see the weapons left almost in his own grasp. He looked at Border Bullet, pointed to the muskets, and nodded, and then himself moved forward, his steps almost as silent as those of a cat.

The deserters were in new business, but they did their best. So far as the sleepers were concerned, they were successful; the intervening space was crossed without awakening Inez or Abigail. The couches were reached, and they were about to seize their prey when a hand was placed on an arm of each.

They wheeled suddenly, and then stood dumfounded. Before them stood Yank and Border Bullet with presented rifles, while Moses crouched between the two, his teeth exposed and his appearance fierce in the extreme, evidently painfully anxious to leap upon the deserters.

It was a startling sight, and the unworthy wearers of blue turned pale and grew weak in the limbs.

"Good-evenin', neighbors!" saluted Yank, with a show of unruffled cordiality. "Egregious fine weather, ain't it? Glad ye dropped in, by hurley! Ef that's anything I like more nor common, it's ter be sociable. How's all yer folks? Hope ye lef' yer wives an' children enjoyin' rumbuxicus health!"

Not a word answered the deserters—they could think of no remarks suitable to the occasion.

"I notice you're wal up in etquake, fur ye lef' yer shootin'-irons outside the drawin' room an' I presoom you scraped yer feet cl'ar o' mud at the door an' give yer keerds ter the waiter. I'm a perlite insex, myself, an' 'customed ter doin' ev'rything in an upper-class style. If I'd knowned ye was comin' I'd had on a swaller-tailed coat an' high dickey—I would, by hurley!—but as you took me onawares, I hope you'll

s'cuse my usin' this bit o' steel an' iron an' brass instead!"

He raised the hammer of his rifle carelessly as he spoke, whereupon one of the deserters uttered a cry.

"Hold on! Don't fire!" he exclaimed, hastily.

His elevated voice aroused Inez and Abigail, and they sat up hastily. The latter uttered a shrill cry, but Yank cut her short.

"Don't do it, Miss Longsleeper—don't! The night air is egregious bad, an' ef ye keep yer mouth open you'll ketch some voylent distemper o' the bronchial tubes, sure's you're alone. Don't be skeered! Them is only some prisoners o' war we've took, an' it's a way we hev. My ancestor, Joshua Yellowbird, captered more'n a million o' the inemy, hoss, foot an' t'otherwise; an' he brung the sun to a dead stop, though he didn't ketch the atrocious thing. Blue-coats, I consait you hev revolvers. Toss 'em down on the floor!"

The deserters hesitated.

"Do it, or we'll open fire on ye with grape-stones an' canisters. We will, by hurley!"

The mountaineer's rifle clicked twice, and the intruders hastened to obey. Their last weapons were meekly surrendered. Inez and Abigail had arisen, and were recovering their courage.

"Now," pursued Yank, "I'll trouble ye ter state how ye got hyar. I know you are Nolaw's men—bold on! don't deny it, fur 'tain't no use—but how come ye hyar?"

"I found the entrance by accident," faintly answered one of the men.

"Whar did the rest on ye go?"

"What do you mean?"

"How many more on ye was thar?"

"We were alone."

"Don't tell no whoppers, mister."

"I'm telling the truth. We two were alone."

"I'll take yer word fur it fur now, but I take it on suspicion. You may be tellin' the truth, an' you may be fabricatin' like hurley. Don't be skeered, Inez; thar ain't an artom o' danger."

"I feel safe now you are here," the girl quickly replied.

"Jes' so, jes' so; we're all safe, an' not so safe, neither, as we be determined. Detarmination, prisoners, is the ingredients of our characters, an' our teeth are sharpened keener than a circular saw."

"Them men hev b'en drinkin'!" declared Miss Longstreeter, solemnly, as she pointed to the deserters.

"Shouldn't be a tall surprised."

"The rum-monster rages even in the wilds an' the desert-places, seekin' whom he may devour!" asserted the great reformer. "The unrighteous is up an' doin', an' the just an' worthy is crushed down an' trod on. The 'arth is a scene o' strife, an' sin, an' upheavals, an' convulsions; an' all because o' the drinkin' an' carousin' o' dissolute man. Oh! the degenerate days! Oh! the iniquity o' the wicked an' the woe o' the good! Oh! the ravagin' o' the drink-demon! Oh! the moral turpitude o' man! Oh! oh!"

"Oh! oh!" echoed Yank, humorously. "By hurley, Miss Longstepper, you ought ter be a poet, like my female cousin was. You hev the same meller flow o' words, an' you roll yer eyes as poetically as a fish fresh out o' water, or a baby with the newrolgy. Ef you'd only rhyme yer words, like my cousin did, you'd achieve immortal glory. I'll give ye a sample, though I ain't no great at it, an' don't know an iambus from a dextile. Ahem!—h-e-e-m! How's this:

"The 'arth was cold, an' damp, an' brittle;
The stew was hot in the old camp-kittle;
The trapper come in from his mornin' trip,
An' swallered stew an' kittle at jest one sip."

The mountaineer caressed his sparse beard complacently.

"That ain't so good as my cousin could 'a' made it, fur she was great on pasture-poems, linnets an' roundabouts, but I consait I got in the main featur's, an' I know the rhymes come right."

He turned abruptly toward the deserters.

"You egregious skunks, you ought ter be skulped, I declare! A man who'll put on a sojer-uniform an' then turn runegade, is too mean ter breathe air more'n twice a week. You're a martial-lookin' brace o' scalawags, I admit, but your clo'se is poooty much all thar is on ye, though you may be some on the drill. My gran'father was a Revolutionary relix, an' he used ter drill me with a stick. He was mortal partic'lar that I kep' my toes p'nted right way, an' when I didn't, he'd whack me with the stick ter limber up my muskles, though he didn't hit nowbar nigh my toes. Wish he's hyar now, by hurley, an' I'd let him drill ye fur the amoosement o' the females. 'Twould be interestin', I consait. He was a master-hand, Border Bullet, ter talk about the knick-knacks o' war."

"Tactics, is the word, I think, Yank."

"Jes' so; knowed 'twas suthin' o' the sort. Wal, he was set on havin' the tick-tacks right, an' he had 'em when he drilled me, at the expense o' my legs. I always tol' him 'twa'n't right ter combine the tick-tacks o' war an' a

birch stick, an' I say so now. I do, by hurley! But I wish he's hyar ter drill our frien's."

He looked at the deserters, who were shaking in their boots. They had decided that the wisest thing they could do was to remain silent, but they were still alarmed for their safety.

"I dunno," pursued the mountaineer, speculatively, as he removed his battered cap and stirred up his flaxen hair with his fingers, "but I could do it, myself. My gran'father l'arned me all the military tarmsan' epithets, an' though it was an egregious while ago, I consait I may recall most on 'em. I'll try! Soldiers, brace up and look martial! You're goin' ter be drilled. Attention, comp'ny!"

"What nonsense is this?" demanded one of the deserters.

"Tain't nonsense—it's military tick-tacks. Attention, comp'ny! Look me in the eye. Present arms! You ain't got no weapons, but yer own arms will do. Why don't ye go through the contortions?"

"I refuse."

"What?"

"I decline to make myself ridiculous."

"So do I," added the second man.

"Jes' what I used ter say ter my gran'father when ne insisted upon marchin' me 'round. D'ye know what he did?"

Yank shook his forefinger at the deserters, and added in a mildly serious voice:

"He took a stick an' licked me like hurley, an' that's what I'll do ter you ef you don't obey. The tick-tacks o' war must be executed. Now, go it. Right, wheel!"

The prisoners hesitated, but Nevermiss raised the hammer of his rifle suggestively. The double click decided them; they obeyed, sullenly but with celerity.

"Good! You're goin' ter do wal with practice. Now, mind what I say, an' do each thing poooty. For'rud march! Holt! Ground arms! Balance yer partners! All hands around! Hold up!—that ain't right. You don't seem ter know the tick-tacks. Present arms! Eyes on the inemy! First four balance yer partners! Ladies' grand chain! Shoulder arms! Sashay! Right wheel! Why don't ye hurry up? You're four orders behind. Double quick time! Look out fur the dog, or he'll bite a hunk out o' yer calves. How's that, Miss Longstreeter? Kin they beat that in Cloveryard, Connecticut? Don't ye wish the sisters o' the Drinkin'-Demon Society was here? Left wheel! Wish I had my gran'father's tick-tack book. Balance yer partners! All hands around! Present arms! Halt! That'll do, ye soldier critters, an' I must say you've done poooty wal, though slower than ye should be. You kin adjourn fur now, but I'll hev ye out fur practice ter-morrer. Thar's suthin' about military tick-tacks I like, by hurley!"

Yank struck his hand forcibly upon his gun, and his face was the picture of mild enthusiasm, but words fail to tell how laughable his late exercises had been to the spectators. The alarmed soldiers no longer dared to refuse obedience, and they did their best, urged on by the occasional clicking of his rifle and Moses's threatening growls, but his remarkable orders had been so hard to obey that they had been in utter confusion.

Inez and Border Bullet, well aware that, however severely he might deal with them as prisoners, he would do them no harm to make them conform to his whim, laughed heartily, and even Miss Abigail condescended to smile.

The mountaineer stroked his beard thoughtfully for a few moments, and then called upon the Sharpshooter to cover the prisoners while he bound them. They protested, but all in vain, and they were soon reduced to a helpless state.

Then Yank asked Border Bullet to walk to the entrance with him. The veteran's expression had grown grave.

"I wanted ter say a word in private, lad," he explained. "Our quarters ain't no longer a place o' security, an' we oughter leave it by ter-morrer night, sure. Ter-morrer, Injuns or no Injuns, I must s'arch by daylight fur Agnes Prior an' the rest. They ain't prisoners, so whar be they? HIDIN', o' course. Wal, I must find 'em. Very likely I'll hev an egregious pile o' tribulation an' distress, but it must be done."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MOUNTAINEER ON THE TRAIL.

YANK YELLOWBIRD did not secure much sleep that night. True, he rested soundly when once inside his blanket, but he was astir before day broke over the hills, and the period of repose had been brief. He was carefully looking to his weapons when Border Bullet awoke.

"Are you resolved to go?" the latter asked.

"To be sure."

"There will be great danger. My escape will enrage the allies, and they will be more dangerous than ever."

"I know, lad; I know. They'll kick up an egregious fuss if they can, but I trust I shall hev the good luck that has carried me through as bad complercations in the past. You'll see that I go afore daybreak, so's ter be an early bird—

an' you can't see it, neither, it's so mortal dark hyar. But I consait it won't be light fur half an hour yet."

"I suppose you are going south of the lake?"

"That's my idee. I've looked less thar, previous, but it seems the only place left. Ef Agnes an' Guv'nor ain't left the hills, they must be thar. I reckon they are hidin' in some hole in the rocks."

"And Richard Prior?"

Yank shook his head gravely, and then slowly replied:

"We won't think ill o' him until we're obliged ter."

"His desertion was unmanly, to say the least."

"I consait so, but I suspeck the boy's mind wa'n't at rest. We're all weak critters when our hearts are touched. My lamented ancestor, Adam Yellowbird, writ a printed dissipation on the proneness o' man ter do foolish things. You see, when he lived at the Garden o' Eden the bulk o' the poperlation fur miles around was centered at that place, an' Adam had a chance ter study 'em. 'Cordin' ter the dissipation Eve was sort o' giddy, an' got my ancestor inter some egregious scrapes, but he said with some emphasis that no man livin', at that time, had a clearer pedigree an' record than him."

"Probably the other men did not dispute him."

"Most likely not, fur Adam would hev thrashed 'em like hurley. Wal, lad, I leave the colony ter your care. The Body-Guard is a good 'eal decimated, an' I hope you'll be as wily as a serpent. Keep the military rascals tied up, an' look out that you don't git ketched ag'in."

"Rest assured, I shall not go out of the cave. I came to grief last night—"

"Anybody was liable to under such circumstances. When Injuns lay down flint in the bushes, at night, the best ov us are liable ter run inter their paws. Wal, I'm off. Ef I don't git inter a fix, nor hev a malev'lent attack o' newrolgy, you'll see me back soon."

The mountaineer shook Border Bullet's hand, thereby unconsciously betraying the fact that grave doubts were in his mind, and then left the cave. He went at once to where the canoe was concealed, secured the craft, and paddled toward the southern bluffs. The eastern sky was beginning to change color, but not yet had the darkness decreased. There was some wind, and a consequent motion of the waters, but except for that, the lake was calm,

Yank reached the further bank without adventure.

Once there he again concealed the canoe, and then went on a hundred yards, and, sitting down in a retired place, waited for the light of day. His mood was thoughtful and serious, but as calm as ever. He knew the chances were against his getting back to the cave without an encounter with the Sioux, but the modest confidence in his ability to outwit them which years of experience had made a part of his nature, did not desert him then.

Day dawned slowly. When it was sufficiently light for active work the mountaineer went to an elevated place and made a careful survey of the vicinity. He saw no signs of the Indians. Even near their camp no moving object was visible; they evidently were not in haste to be moving.

Then his own work was begun.

He had no clew upon which to work, but intended to search for trails. Agnes and Guv'nor did not possess the ability to leave a trail hard to follow, and if they had passed that way he hoped to find "signs." Working systematically, he examined all the natural courses, such as gulches, through which they would be likely to pass, but did not forget to keep a vigilant watch for Indians at the same time.

As he was upon just the right ground, there could be but one sequel to his search. He suddenly came upon something which made him pause.

"Signs, by hurley!" he muttered, aloud. "Them is tracks, an' Guv'nor made 'em. I'd know 'em anywhar. The boy steps odd, owin' ter corns, or some egregious deformed freaks o' his walkers. Guv'nor's tracks, an' about twenty-four hours old, I should say. Jest about right. Hullo! hyer's more! A female's foot this time. Long an' narrer, with a heel sharp enough to pick slivers out with. It's egregious funny what feet a woman has, an' I never'd think they could get over the ground a tall. I'd as soon try ter balance on a grasshopper's leg as them feet— Another set o' tracks, right beside hers, an' a man's this time. Land o' Goshen! I b'lieve them is Prior's. Hullo! hullo! what's he walkin' beside her fur? Looks like a make-up, I consait. An' she may hev a protector, arter all. I'll foller. I'd be right glad ter find 'em all, safe an' sound."

His honest face brightened, and he moved on briskly, but had gone less than two rods when he abruptly halted. His grasp tightened on his rifle; he raised his head and flashed a quick glance around. His gray eyes gleamed sharply, and the wide mouth, so mild and genial at times, was now set and stern.

He saw nothing around him that was suspi-

cious, but at his feet lay the trail of two or more Indians, and the footprints not only crossed those he was following, but were not over two hours old, apparently.

Motionless as a statue the veteran stood for a few moments, one hand on the hammer of his rifle, and then his gaze dropped again to the ground.

"Injuns, sure's I'm alive," he muttered, "but thar may be notbin' in it. They must be passed in the dark, an' they couldn't foller a trail then. I'll see."

Dividing his attention between the sides of the gulch and the trail, he advanced, but had gone only a few yards when the tracks of the Indians diverged from the others. He breathed freer; after all, it seemed to be only a chance that the two trails had for a time been side by side.

Following the trail in which he was interested he was led to a point where more was to be seen. Several sets of tracks were visible, some coming and some going, but none were those of Sioux. With the exception of those made by Agnes and Guv'nor, all were Prior's.

Yank's face brightened once more. If he interpreted these signs right it meant that the trio were hiding not far away, and that Prior was moving about somewhat, going and coming, in the vicinity of the refuge.

A little further, however, there was a change for the worse. Sioux footprints reappeared, and they were decidedly fresh. Yank paused and looked sharply about. Nearly all the tracks, including those of the Indians, entered an exceedingly narrow gulch just ahead. The place was a *cil-de-sac*, the further end being a dark, narrow hole in the rocks.

The mountaineer frowned, meditated, and then retreated a few steps and crouched behind a boulder. Fixing his gaze upon the blind end of the gulch, he waited patiently. Perhaps five minutes had passed when there were signs of life in the gulch. A human figure glided out of the dark recess, and a second followed.

Both were Sioux Indians.

They paused and began to talk, their eyes sending constant, investigating glances about as they did so. Evidently they were disappointed and perplexed, while it was just as plain that they were in a radically hostile mood. A more villainous-looking pair Yank had never seen.

The discussion lasted several minutes, and did not seem to be very satisfactory. They finally moved forward to the junction of the two gulches. Their intention seemed to be to keep on, but the idea was suddenly abandoned. As one man they sunk to the ground, where they were half-concealed by rocks, and Yank distinctly heard them raise the hammers of their rifles.

They were looking up the larger gulch, and he flashed a glance in the same direction. What he saw showed him that a crisis was at hand.

Richard Prior was coming down the gulch.

Everything went to show that the young man was unsuspecting of danger, for he was not taking the ordinary precautions that would occur to a novice. He was walking briskly, but in deep thought, and without an eye to his surroundings.

Yank Yellowbird looked again at the Sioux. Each man had thrust forward his rifle, and their purpose was not to be doubted. Unless interfered with, they would shoot Prior.

Quietly the mountaineer thrust his own rifle forward and looked along the barrel. Bitter foes that they were, he did not intend to kill either, but one must be rendered helpless. His "bead" was on one dusky arm, and at that distance he could not miss. The Indians' rifles were slowly raised to their shoulders, and at that moment he fired.

The rocks rang with the discharge, and the scene had changed at the spot where the Sioux crouched. One had dropped his rifle and was writhing with the pain of a broken arm, while the other looked around wildly.

Nevermiss sprung from his cover.

"Drop yer weapon, ye atrocious insex!" he shouted, as he ran toward the red pair.

He had to deal with men not easily intimidated. The uninjured warrior seemed dazed for a moment, but the weakness passed like a flash. His dark eyes glittered, and he swung his rifle around to get a shot at the hated enemy of his tribe. He never secured it. Nevermiss had been prepared, and he was ready for the attempt. He pressed the trigger of his revolver, and the bullet went straight home. The warrior fell, never to rise.

The man with the broken arm was full of courage and venom, and, despite his injury, he raised his rifle again. What he would have succeeded in doing will never be known, for another rifle cracked and he fell dead beside his companion.

Richard Prior had taken a hand in the battle.

The young man hurried forward, pale and excited.

"Great heavens! is the cave attacked?" he gasped.

"What cave?" Yank demanded.

"The one yonder. Have you been in?"

"No."

"And the savages?"

"They jest come from yonder hole in the rocks."

"Powers of mercy!—then they are killed!" cried Prior, his voice husky and tremulous.

"Who? Who do you mean?"

"Agnes!"

"Was she in thar?"

"Yes; I left two hours ago to make an effort to find you, or some of our party. My God, Yank, she was in the cave with only the negro boy as a protector. She has been found by those red demons and murdered!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"WHERE IS AGNES?"

PRIOR had staggered back to a rock, against which he now leaned, pale and trembling. His expression was wild and frightened, and his eyes abnormally large, but Yank, though deeply disturbed, retained his calm exterior. He glanced quickly at the fallen Sioux, and then laid his hand firmly on Richard's arm.

"Clear up, lad, fur it may not be as bad as you say. I don't think it is."

"How can it be otherwise, if those red fiends have been in the cave?"

"I don't know the 'rangement o' the place, nor their chances o' findin' whoever is in thar—"

"They could not help finding them."

"Not'standin' that, I don't b'lieve they did. They come out lookin' sore disapp'nted, an' one thing you kin depend on: ef they had found Agnes an' Guv'nor, they would hav brought 'em pris'ners or—or hev some other sign that they had found their prey."

The mountaineer lacked the cold resolution to refer plainly to the ghastly trophies he had in mind.

"But I don't see—"

"Describe the cave, lad."

Richard briefly explained.

"I'll bet a beaver," Yank then added, "that they never seen Agnes an' the boy. Mebbe they slipped out o' t'other exit, or hid som'ers. We'll soon settle it, though. Foller me!"

He glanced around to make sure no other Indians were in sight, and then advanced along the smaller gulch. He could see the footprints of the two Sioux, and no others, and this satisfied him that no more had gone over the ground. There was but little fear of meeting an enemy, yet he used a certain amount of caution as they advanced along the passage.

When it widened into the little cave, both men looked about eagerly. The fire was burning as Richard had left it, and its light was sufficient to make all parts of the room easily seen.

It was deserted; there was no sign of Agnes or the boy.

"The other passage!" exclaimed Prior, eagerly; and he hastened along without waiting for Yank.

He followed it straight to the fissure in the cliff, where he had blocked the smaller entrance with loose stones. The barricade remained in place, but there were still no signs of the missing ones. There was absolutely no one in the cave except Yank and Richard. It had been a great relief to the latter not to find any signs of violence there, and his prevailing expression was that of puzzled, blank wonder as he turned to the mountaineer.

"What does it mean?" he demanded.

"You're sure thar ain't no nook we ain't seen, be you?"

"Yes."

"Then thar is hope."

"Of what?"

"That they hev escaped."

"How can that be?"

"I'll proceed ter 'lustrate. When them two Injuns come out o' the cave, their look was one o' doubt an' disapp'ntment, an' I'll bet anything they felt jest that way. Now, there is only one way o' explainin' it; they went in expectin', or hopin', ter find prey, an' they didn't get what they went arter."

"But why should Agnes leave the cave?"

"That is what we want ter know an' must find out. Come back ter the gulch, an' le's begin all over. Hyar we be: now fur work. You stan' thar, keepin' a lookout fur Injuns, an' I'll do some figgerin'. Thar's a good 'eal ter be larned tharby."

Before he had ceased speaking the mountaineer was examining the ground, searching for footprints. He easily located Prior's, the Sioux's and his own, but what he sought was evidence that Agnes and Guv'nor had left the cave. Before many seconds had passed he came to a sudden stop. He had found new tracks, and they puzzled him. A gleam of light soon crossed his face, but he shook his head dubiously and continued his study. Finally he turned to Prior.

"You say that you, Agnes an' the boy was all thar was o' your party?"

"Yes."

"Didn't have no visitors?"

"No."

"Then I'm puzzled."

"What is it?"

"Unless I am condemn'dly mistaken, thar is the tracks o' Peter Lefferts, leadin' straight ter the cave!"

Richard started.

"By my life, that is ominous."

"I allow 'tis. Can they hev left with Old Porcupine?"

"I hope not."

"So do I, by hurley! I consait you ain't fully posted on the so-called Lost Link, but he's turned out ter be a fu'st-class scoundrel, an' is with the Injuns as their friend an' ally."

"Ab! I never liked the fellow. But I don't think Agnes knew this."

"She didn't, unless she's heerd on't sence she left me."

"Undoubtedly, she was ignorant."

"Then it may be Lefferts has gone in thar, an' got her ter leave by means o' pooty words an' fine promises o' hope. Wait! I'll look furder."

He did this, but all his efforts failed to develop any evidence that Lefferts had returned, or that Agnes and Guv'nor had passed over the ground. This point settled there was only one thing more to do; the minor entrance to the cave must receive attention. They went there, and tore down enough of the barricade to enable them to pass through. Then Yank resumed his search, but it was very short work. He soon abandoned it and turned to Richard with a nod.

"I was right."

"In what way?"

"Agnes, Guv'nor an' Old Porcupine left hyar, tergether, not two hours ago."

"My heavens! has that villain decoyed them away?"

"I consait he has."

"But I told her not to leave."

"Possibly the Porcupine's lie was too specious ter be seen inter or resisted."

"The scoundrel! I will give him a lesson when we meet!"

Prior spoke in an agitated voice, and his grasp on his rifle was decidedly nervous. He seemed to have forgotten for the time that Agnes was a woman he was bound to hate.

"Your idees are kerreck, an' we want ter be about it right off. I'll foller the trail, an' you foller me. Ef you see any red-skin, say so; though I'll hev an eye open, too. The shootin' we did may bring a whole passel on 'em down onter us an' make a lively time. Ef we hev ter fight, b'ar in mind that our pedigreeens must be presarved sacred at all hazards."

The work was begun. The trail first led due west, and then began to curve to the right. This curve was maintained until, after a wide *detour*, the course of the trio was due east. All this was significant. It indicated a desire to keep away from Agnes's friends, and, Yank strongly suspected, an equal desire to avoid the Sioux and ex-soldiers. Working on these theories, Nevermiss came to the conclusion that Lefferts desired Agnes wholly for himself. No doubt he had hoodwinked and deceived her, and was luring her away to some definite point.

As he was an experienced borderman, there might yet be a good deal of trouble in running him down.

"He's a bad one—Leg-it is," observed the mountaineer, shaking his head. "I didn't like him at fu'st sight, fur his face is a bad one, but I put up with him fur Inez's sake. I consait the gal don't think none too wal on him, though. Ef we ketch him, it'll be wal ter give him a moral lesson."

"A bullet would be more appropriate," Richard curtly replied.

"I dunno—I don't take ter shootin' kindly, when it kin be avoided. The Lord never intended his creetur's ter be butchers an' slayers, an' I won't kill even an Injun onless it is my life, or some other honest person's ag'in' his. What a good world this would be ef man would leave it as 'twas made! But he won't; them who are egregious scamps at heart will kick up trouble, an' then thar must be fightin'. I know, fur I've had 'em forced onter me ever sence I's big enough ter fight, an' afore that, I had ter be licked an' say nothin'."

"Member one case in school, when I's mod'-ritly small. The master an' I disagreed on some p'int o' etiquette, when he allowed I was throwin' paper-wads at him. I admit I did it, an' when one hit him on his bald head he detected me. Wal, he got me up afore him an' give me a lecture on immoral depravity, as he called it, an' then said he'd got ter punish me."

"You may go an' sit between Sally Shawan' Susan White," sez he.

"I don't want ter," sez I.

"Do as I tell ye," sez he, frownin'.

"Tain't proper," sez I. "I don't want ter set between no girls," sez I, droppin' a tear on the floor big as a sasser.

"You've got ter do it," sez he.

"Thar ain't room," sez I.

"Thar is, with a leetle squeezin'," sez he.

"By this time all the gals was gigglin', an' my face was red as a beet."

"I won't 'low no gal ter squeeze me!" sez I, an' I began ter blubber right out loud.

"Obey me," sez he, "or you'll get thrashed."

"Thrash away," sez I, almost wild with mental pain an' shame. "You may lick me," sez I, "but no boy o' kerreck principles will set between two gals, nor nigh them, nor nigh one gal. I kin b'ar a lickin', but I won't be disgraced. I'd never dar' look the Yellowbird fam'-

ly in the face ef I was seen settin' by a gal. Lick me ef ye must,' sez I, while my tears splashed like rain-drops on the floor, 'but I'll be condemn'd ef I set beside them egregious gals!'

"You see, Richard, I'd took a stand fur upright principles, an' I's bound ter stick ter it. I did, too. The master thrashed me like hurley, but them giggleen' gals didn't hev no chance to worry me."

The last words were absently spoken. They had been advancing at good speed along the trail, and had reached a point nearly on a line with the camp of the allies. It was, however, a mile further south, and it became clear that Lefferts intended to avoid every one and have the prisoners—for such, Yank felt sure, Agnes and Guv'nor really were—all to himself.

The trailers had been gaining, and the mountaineer found ground for hope, but there was now a new complication. He paused, looked sharply around, and then turned to Prior.

"Richard, I'm afeerd thar is bad news," he added. "Right thar, somebody has had bosses tied. They are now gone, an' I'll be thrashed ef I don't b'lieve Leg-it has drawed all the best keerds. He's got his party mounted on bosses, an' how in hurley be we goin' ter run 'em down?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

OLD PORCUPINE'S PRIZE.

WHEN Agnes and Guv'nor were left in the cave by Richard Prior, both were in an extremely nervous mood. Of the two, Agnes was the braver, but her mind was in a state where clear thought was out of the question, and she could only brood over her misfortunes and give place to dark forebodings as to the future.

Prior's mission, though plausible enough on the surface, was wild and impracticable. He felt weak and helpless, not because he lacked natural courage, but on account of his ignorance of border ways. He felt, and with cause, that he was no match for the wily foe, and it was the small hope of finding Yank that led him to leave his companions.

Considering the hour—just before daybreak—this seemed to be the wildest of schemes, yet, if he had taken the right course, he might have seen Yank leave his canoe after crossing the lake.

He did not, and events followed fast.

Not long had Agnes and Guv'nor been alone when footsteps sounded not far away. Agnes looked up quickly. Had Prior returned?

No! The man who stood there, distinctly revealed by the light of the fire, was Old Porcupine.

She experienced a feeling of disappointment and doubt, which was not unmixed with hope. This man had been a member of Yank's party, and though her association with him had not been pleasant, there was a shade of hope in his presence.

His own manner was easy, confident and hearty.

"Hullo! hullo!" he exclaimed, smiling broadly. "So you're hyar? Prior give me directions, but I was afeerd I might go wrong."

"Did you come from Mr. Prior?" she eagerly asked.

"I did that. He's out with Yank Yellowbird—"

"Is Yank here?" cried Agnes, in delight.

"He ain't ten minutes' walk away. He an' Prior is watchin' the reds, while I—"

"Are the Indians near?"

"Bet yer life!"

"What is to be done?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands.

"Why, I'm ter take ye to them—ter Yank an' Prior—an' then we'll all slip away an' beat the reds. We've had a heap o' trouble ter find ye, but ef we kin once get ter the big cave we'll win the fight. With Yank at the head, thar ain't no question of it."

Lefferts was watching her slyly while he spoke. He knew that he would come to grief if Yank once got his hands upon him, and was not quite sure whether Agnes regarded him as a doubtful character or not. That she did not know the full measure of his perfidy was proven by his reception.

"Let us go to Yank," she replied, stepping quickly forward.

"All right; an' the sooner we git thar, the better."

"Massa Lefferts," put in Guv'nor, "be you suah de Shos won't ketch we'uns? I's a dwelful wicked niggah, an' dough I's tryin' to repent, I can't decompose my mind from thoughts ob wab."

"You'll be all right, Blacky; bump yerself, an' trot along with me. You needn't be scared; your face is so durned black it ain't visible only by day."

Old Porcupine chuckled at what he imagined to be a good joke. He was in high glee at the result of his device, and could hardly keep grave enough to suit the occasion. He led the way through the passage to the gulch. Day was just dawning, and the rocky gap was light enough to be fairly open to one's gaze. Lefferts looked, and then stepped quickly back.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" whispered Agnes, catching the startled inflection of his voice.

"An Injun, by thunder! Look fur your self!"

Agnes obeyed, but she wanted no prolonged survey. She saw the Indian, and that was enough. He was near the entrance to the smaller gulch, and was evidently making a careful reconnaissance. He was one of those subsequently encountered by Yank and Prior; he had seen Lefferts go in, but had not recognized him, and was now investigating.

"Ain't thar no other way out?" Old Porcupine asked.

"Yes."

"Whar is it?"

"At the rear."

"Lead me thar at once."

The man spoke with a show of alarm, which looked to Agnes like proof of his sincerity. Really, he was afraid his prize would fall into the hands of the Sioux. The sight of the warrior settled Agnes's last doubt, and she and Guv'nor went willingly.

It was the work of only a few moments for Lefferts to remove enough of the stone barrier in the fissure for them to go out. This done, he replaced the stones, correctly thinking it might deceive the Indian skulker, and then led his dupes away.

They made the half-circle along which Yank afterward followed. Old Porcupine managed to still Agnes's first doubts with plausible words, and when the sound of rifle-shots reached their ears, at the time of the skirmish had by Yank and Prior with the Indians, it proved a further aid for the schemer. He convinced Agnes that Yank was bravely keeping the Indians at bay to cover her flight, and that it would not only be dangerous to them but unjust to Yank to waste any valuable time.

In this way he lured her to where he had horses waiting.

His whole life had been one of duplicity, and few men were any more fertile of expedients. On the present occasion he was deceiving every one, and nobody more than Storm-Cloud and Lieutenant Nolaw. He had discovered Agnes's refuge the previous day, but had told no one. Stealing two horses from Storm-Cloud's party, he first left them where he wanted them, and then made the attempt to capture Agnes.

When the horses were reached, however, he knew that he must show his hand. He had but two, and as speed was a great necessity, he would not be burdened with Guv'nor. He bade Agnes mount one of the animals, and himself swung into the saddle of the second.

By this time Guv'nor's face had lengthened.

"Wh-wh-whar am I gwine to ride?" he asked.

"You'll walk!" curtly answered Lefferts.

"Is it fur to go?" plaintively asked the boy.

"You'll see. Git up!"

The last words were to his horse. He struck each of the animals a sharp blow, and away they went at a rapid trot. Guv'nor came flying behind with his eyes looking almost as large as two moons. Guv'nor was a badly frightened boy. Agnes looked back uneasily.

"Can't be ride with one of us?" she asked.

"No!" was the surly reply.

"But he can't long run es fast as this."

"Then let him stop."

"Surely, Mr. Lefferts, you would not desert the poor child, would you?"

"He's only a nigger."

"Sir, he is a human being, and a deserving boy, I insist upon stopping for him!"

She made a motion to check the speed of her horse, but Old Porcupine caught her arm roughly.

"No, you don't, my lady!" he growled; "I am runnin' this circus, an' I'll do it to suit myself."

Raising the stick which he carried, he brought it down several times on each horse, lashing them until they broke into a rapid gallop. Guv'nor saw his last chance fading.

"Hol' on!—hol' on!" he loudly cried, his voice full of terror. "Doan' leave me; de Shos will kill me dead, suah! Help! help! Doan' leave me! I's a wicked niggah, an' I want time to repent. Oh! oh! Doan' leave me!"

It was a pitiful appeal, for it was brought forth by mortal terror, but Old Porcupine did not heed it. He continued to lash the horses, and the boy, though straining every nerve, was rapidly left behind. Agnes had made another remonstrance—this time one full of spirit and indignation—but she might as well have appealed to a rock.

"Talk ef ye want to," Lefferts insolently replied, "fur I don't care a red fur your babble."

"Sir, I believe you are deceiving me!" she exclaimed.

"In what way?"

"I don't believe you are taking me to my friends."

Old Porcupine laughed hoarsely.

"You've jest about hit it, my darlin'!" he mockingly replied. "Am I fool enough ter take you ter that long-legged, lank Yank Yellowbird? You bet, I ain't!"

"Then where are we going?"

"On our bridal tower. Hal ha! Ain't it a jolly occasion? When I proposed ter you, an'

you said No so glibly, you didn't know the Lost Link from Locust, did ye? You didn't know my gentle way, did ye? I'm the only one o'my kind. I'm honest, but I ain't a hypocrite. Now, my bouny bride, say farewell ter the Black Hills. Mounted on two good bosses we'll soon be out o' them, an' we won't stop until a good bund'ud miles away. Somewhar, fur away, we'll find a little cottage on the prairie an' live like turkle-doves, with none ter molest or make us afraid. Ef they do molest us, I'll put a rifle-ball through their blamed heads. Fur you, fair Agnes, I've given up all, frien's an' kindred—Inez, 'mongst the rest—an' I'll live only fur you. Hal ha!"

Poor Agnes, pale and frightened, gazed at her companion in dumb dismay. His manner was as wild as his words, and as he lashed on the rapidly-going horses, it almost seemed that he was insane. But he was not; he was sane, speaking in the orthodox sense, and all the more to be feared. She was his captive, and her last friend vanished when Guv'nor was left behind in the mad race.

"P'raps," added Lefferts, when he saw that she did not reply, "you won't be so pert when I ag'in offer ter prove ye innocent o' runnin' away with Reginald Eyre. Dick Prior accused you unjustly; I kin prove your innocence, an' I alone. I'll do it when you're my wife—not before."

"Inhuman monster!" Agnes ejaculated, "I will never be your wife!"

"Soft an' easy, my dear. We are goin' whar you will hev no choice. I sha'n't care a red whether you say yes or no, an' then the Lost Link will come forth in all his glory."

"Man, man!" faltered Agnes, "if you are human, have mercy upon me!"

"I do hev it."

"Then take me back to my friends."

"Either you're a fool or I'm one!" bluntly responded Old Porcupine. "Arter all I've risked, ter give up the game? No! I'll see ye a clod fu'st, by the fiends!"

They dashed around the beetling point of a cliff, and then Lefferts suddenly reined in his horse. A troubled expression flashed to his face, and it almost seemed that his bronzed cheeks grew pale. They had ridden almost into the midst of a party of horsemen who were comin' from the opposite direction, and were so near that a collision almost occurred before the horses could be checked.

These men were dressed in blue, and at their head rode Nolaw!

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DESERTERS' CAMP.

No one was more surprised by this meeting than Lieutenant Nolaw. He reined in his horse and his men did the same, but their impetus had carried them forward so that, as all parties came to a halt, Lefferts and Agnes were half-surrounded by the deserters. There was no attempt at escape, and such an attempt would have been wholly useless.

Lefferts sat in the saddle the picture of disappointment, anger and dismay, and though, knowing that only one course was open to him, he made a desperate effort to recover and act a part which flashed upon him as his sole hope, his tongue lacked its usual readiness.

"Hullo! what have we here?" Nolaw demanded.

"You come jest in time, lieutenant," answered Old Porcupine, trying to be as bluff as ever.

"I should say so. What the dickens is going on here—an' elopement?"

The deserter looked suspiciously at Peter and his captive.

"Great Caesar, no!" and the Lost Link forced a laugh. "You see, I've ketched her."

"I should say so."

"An' was bringin' her to you."

"Oh! Then why did you turn your horses' heads away from our camp?"

"It was ter git away from Yank Yellowbird."

"Ha! is that fellow astir?"

"I reckon he is, an' he come nigh puttin' a lead pill inter me. He was actin' as guide fur her, but I see'd 'em, an' when they halted a bit I slipped in an' got her away. Yellowbird sent a bullet so close ter my ears that I heerd it sing, but I got away."

The fellow lied glibly, and now that the first shock was over, he looked honest and frank. He really had little expectation of deceiving Nolaw, but all his natural instincts prompted him to lie, and the words came fluently enough.

Nolaw smiled grimly.

"So you were taking her to me?"

"I was that."

"Well, you've done it"—Nolaw's smile deepened—"and now I'll take charge of her. Mr. Lefferts, I thank you sincerely. Let me press your hand."

"I'm glad ter be o' service to ye, lieutenant."

The two shook hands with an appearance of warmth. Lefferts had a suspicion that Nolaw did not believe one word he had said, but he was not going to let a little thing like that discompose him. He expected to be obliged to tell more

ictions before he got out of the difficulty, and these explanations would be as ready as the first.

"We will now go back to camp," continued Nolaw. "My men and I have been out on a scout, but you have saved us further trouble, friend Porcupine. Possibly, too, we may meet Yank Yellowbird by the way and capture him. Of course, Peter—you bear a Scriptural name, don't you? I never noticed it before, but I must say it fits well. Of course you will accompany us. Your hearty interest makes you seem like one of us."

"Thankee kindly, lieutenant; I will go along. All my interests are the same as yours, an' ef ye don't object, I'll jine yer party permanent."

"Object! Heart of oak, I shall be delighted to have such a follower. And now, Mrs. Prior, pray turn your horse and ride by my side. We will breakfast at camp."

Not a word spoke Agnes. She felt dazed by the vicissitudes of her wretched life, and, not being able to detect the covert meaning of Nolaw's speeches, she actually believed that they were all sincere, and that he was imposed upon fully by Old Porcupine. She submitted to her fate in silence, and as Nolaw did not care to converse with her in the presence of all his men, they rode north without other than casual remarks.

Nolaw's utter disbelief in Old Porcupine's story was shown by the fact that he did not make any attempt to find Yank, but he was only reserving his investigation. Lesserts had a true story, and Nolaw wanted it—a remark which would also apply to Agnes Prior.

They reached the camp without further important incident. The deserters were doing something to erect shelter, and their tools, few as they were, came in good play. The lieutenant ordered his men to resume work as soon as breakfast was eaten, and then, having satisfied his own hunger, proceeded to cross-examine Lesserts. Telling him plainly that he did not believe the story, he tried to extract the truth. Never had he made a more lamentable failure; Lesserts held stubbornly to the statement he had made, an' the slight clew he might have given was lost to the allies.

Nolaw next tried Agnes, but she, being in a desperate mood, refused to say anything at all; she would not even confirm or deny Old Porcupine's version. And there the matter rested.

During the day work progressed briskly upon the huts the deserters were erecting. Storm-Cloud and his men were searching for Nevermiss and the others, but no favorable report was made. None of the deserters joined this search during this day. They were practically useless in the scientific work which was being done, and the Sioux did not care to have them around; so every blue-coat worked with zeal and effect.

Two huts were being put up. One was for Nolaw, and was divided into two rooms. The second was in one large room, and was to be occupied by the rest of the deserters. These approached completion as the sun neared the Western horizon.

There were two men who watched the work and neither took part in it nor made themselves visible. Somewhat back from the camp, and concealed by abundant bushes and rocks, Yank Yellowbird and Richard Prior lay waiting with what patience they could call to their aid. They had traced Agnes and her captors, and now knew just what they had to do. The next question was, how was it to be done? They were waiting for night, to see if the work be accomplished.

Agnes was all the while visible, but she had been bound, and was not allowed to leave the camp. Yank frequently expressed pity for her, but Richard said nothing. What his thoughts were as he saw his wife of happier days surrounded by the lawless deserters cannot be known, but he was as ready as Yank to risk his life for her, taking care to add, somewhat emphatically, that *any* woman in similar danger demanded of honest men every effort to save her.

"An' I consait we'll do it, too," added Yank, after one of these conversations. "Life is only a game o' checkers on an egregious big board, an' ef a man is a decent player he won't lose all his pieces without doin' some jumpin', hisself. The Yellowbirds was always famous fur gittin' out o' atrocious tribulations, an' I've had my share o' good luck sence I got ter be o' full growth. I had a mortal hard time on't previous ter that, an' experienced some gallin' defeats at the bands o' my masculine parent."

"No doubt he taught it was for your good," replied Prior, willing to humor the mountaineer's mood.

"I dare say—I dare say; but ef he'd b'en at t'other end o' the stick, he wouldn't seen no great good in it. That egregious stick bit like a serpent an' stung most as bad as the newrolgy. The old gentleman b'lieved in moral depravity, an' the savin' grace o' the rod, my father did. 'Yank,' he would say, shakin' his head mournful, 'the kerrick principles must be a rulin' featur' o' the Yellowbirds, an' the only way ter distill it inter them is ter use the rod. I hate ter do it, but the principles must be distilled.'

"I wish I hadn't been born fur a distillery," sez I.

"Remember the fam'ly pedigreeen," sez he.

"They must 'a' b'en a hard set, ef all on 'em was licked as much as me afore they got red o' sin," sez I.

"Don't scoff," sez he, "but bear the thrashin' as wal as you can. It has ter be did. Besides, boy," sez he, in a sad, musin' way, "it hurts me more nor it does you."

"S'pose we swap places, an' let me use the stick," sez I.

"Onpossible," sez he, kinder flustered, "but you must hev patience, an' you kin git squar' by lickin' your boys bimie-by. The kerrick principles must be distilled inter the Yellowbirds," sez he; an' then he used up two more sticks on me.

"In this way did my parental father tutor me, an' ef he didn't drive out all the sin from me 'twan't his fault. He stirred it up like hurley, an' it's possible he stunted its growth."

Yank's good-humor seemed never to flag, but he did not let anything escape his notice. His gaze was never withdrawn from the camp long at a time, and he was attentively studying every chance, but this did not interfere with his whimsical stories. He had never been more given to alleged recollections, and his cheerful conceits did much to make the hours more endurable to Prior.

When darkness fell the deserters ceased work with a feeling of satisfaction. Both their huts were up, and that to be used by Nolaw was all done except some minor things which were not of pressing importance. Agnes was removed to one of the two rooms in this building, and, though the place had no door except that which led to the larger room, a guard was posted at the entrance. He was pacing back and forth near the door when the darkness shut him out from view of the men in the bushes.

The next two hours were uneventful. The deserters had supper, and then they retired to their quarters. The night was extremely dark, and no light fell upon the scene except the narrow belt which, shining through the door of the larger building, fell upon the ground. Nolaw had retired to his room and hung a blanket over the door.

These details were carefully noted by Yank, for they had important bearing on his plans.

He was determined to rescue Agnes during the night if such a thing was possible. Of course he would have to wait until the camp became quiet, so as to avoid chance encounters. After awhile all the soldiers except the guard would probably be asleep. Nolaw had taken one man into his hut, but it was likely he had gone as a companion during the evening. There was little fear of having many in the way when the hour of action came.

Yank waited patiently. All signs of life finally ceased in the village except the pacing of the single guard, and he was barely revealed by the light from the larger building. The second man had not been seen to leave Nolaw, but Yank determined to wait no longer.

He shook hands with Prior and made his way toward the village.

When near Nolaw's hut he resorted to his old, Indian-like tactics. Dropping on his hands and knees, he crept cautiously through the short grass until he reached the rear of the hut. Then he tried to investigate. He knew there was still a light in the lieutenant's room, and he had hoped to get a view of the interior, but in this he was disappointed. There had been no opening left at the rear for a window, and the work on the building had been so well done that he could only gain the view by cutting a hole through the wall—something he did not think prudent until he knew that Nolaw was asleep.

Agnes's room was equally closed from notice.

Yank crouched down by the wall of the hut to think. Should he wait awhile longer, or make some move at once?

He was still considering this point when footsteps sounded near at hand, and a man came around the corner of the building. Yank grasped his rifle more closely and eyed him sharply. The darkness was intense, but even then he could tell that it was one of the soldiers, and it flashed upon him that the guard who should have been on the front side of the hut was doing a little wandering on his own responsibility.

The man halted; his hand was thrust inside his pocket; and then his head was tipped back and a mellow gurgle followed. He was taking a drink of some beloved beverage. This done he moved forward, his course taking him directly toward the crouching mountaineer. The latter hoped to escape notice, but it was not so to be.

The soldier suddenly halted and stood staring at the figure by the wall.

"Hallo! what's this?" he demanded.

There was a panther-like spring; strong hands grasped the deserter; and in a moment more he was lying upon his back with his adversary sitting astride him.

"It's me!" coolly answered Nevermiss, "an' ef you sing out, I'll be condemn'd ef I don't thrash you like hurley! Not a word, now, fur I

am what might be called a desp'rit man. I hev a reputation that would make ye turn pale as a ghost ef I told it, but I ain't hyar ter swap pedigrees. I'm hyar fur business, an' you're my pris'ner!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

YANK BECOMES A SOLDIER.

The deserter did not cry out; he could not have done so if his life depended upon it; the strong hands which encircled his neck had a language of their own even more effective than the words.

The mountaineer relaxed his hold somewhat.

"B'ar in mind what I said," he continued. "No hollerin', now, o' whatsomdever natur'. I'd hate ter kill ye, but it's a mel'choly fact that I'm the most bloodthirsty desperado this side the Mississip', when I git on a tear. I'm afraid o' myself at sech a time—I be, by hurley! Don't ye holler!"

It would have been amusing under some circumstances to hear genial Yank give himself such a bad character, but he wanted to frighten the ex-soldier into silence. He must be silenced, somehow. And it was done when Yank laid the flat side of a knife against his cheek.

"Don't kill me!" he gasped.

"Do ye give up?"

"Yes, yes!"

"An' won't holler?"

"I will not."

"That's all right, mister, an' I'm glad on't. I usually kill fifteen or seventeen men a day, but I'll let it lay over fur once. I'm goin' ter tie ye up, though; I've brought strings, an' I'll do it. Lay still, now."

The cords with which the mountaineer had provided himself, in view of such an emergency, now came in good use. He applied them with celerity, skill and effectiveness, and when a gag was added, the deserter was helpless. Yank meditated for a moment, and then carried him to the outskirts of the camp and tied him to a sapling. His next step was to gain a view of Nolaw's room, something that was easy now that the guard was removed.

Nolaw and one of his followers were there, smoking and playing cards.

The mountaineer frowned. He could do nothing while the second man was present, for he could hardly hope to dispose of both without creating an alarm. He must wait for the man to go—but what then? The absence of the guard would be discovered, and an alarm would at once follow.

Yank stroked his thin beard thoughtfully for a moment, and then nodded emphatically.

"It's got ter be done—no other way. Thar must be a guard hyar, an' as the ginervine article is otherwise engaged, it must be me. I've got ter put on bis blue garments, sure as hurley, an' pose as a United States sojer. I hate ter take the place o' an egregious deserter—but what's the odds? No historian ain't hyar ter write it down in the Yellowbird pedigreeen, an' even ef he was, all the Yellowbirds hev b'lieved in justifiable hypocrisy. Some ov 'em hev b'en atrocious tricky in a good cause, an' I consait I hev the same priv'lege."

He hastened back to where he had left the captive deserter, and soon relieved him of his outer garments. The man was of larger frame than Yank, or, more correctly, he carried more flesh, and the clothes went on over the mountaineer's with some pulling.

The metamorphosis made, he returned to the hut.

"S'pose I've got ter march back an' forth like a crowbar without a j'int in its back, sojer fashion; though I hate her like hurley. A man never was made ter walk like he hadn't no j'nts; 'tain't nat'ral, an' it don't look pooty; but I'm bound ter keep up 'pearances. Ef the atrocious newrolgy don't snap my muskles all out o' plumb, I'll walk as stiff as ye please!"

Bearing his musket with a fair imitation of the guard, he began to pace back and forth.

"Wish my gran'father, the Revolutionary, relix, was hyar now, ter give me some p'ints an' tarms on military tick-tacks. Lemme see! What'll Nolaw say when he comes out? He'll say: 'Smith?' Then I'll say: 'Ay, ay, sir?' An' he'll say: 'Is all wal?' An' I'll say: 'Yes, by hurley!' Stop!—that won't do. The Yellowbirds hev pecoharities, an' I must drop 'em while I'm a sojer. No 'lusions ter my fam'ly pedigreeen, nor no talk ter give me away. Jes' so—I'll talk like a Harvard professor o' botany an' other weeds."

Meditating thus, the veteran walked his beat for ten minutes with new experience. He could hear Nolaw and his man laughing and talking inside, and he wished in vain that the man would go.

He was considering the advisability of leaving the camp to summon Prior to his aid—a risky step, since Nolaw might come out at any moment—when he saw some one else approaching. The man advanced boldly until quite near.

"An Injun, sure's I live!" Yank muttered. "Now fur a test case, I'll challenge him, military style an' tarms."

He raised his voice and added:

"Hold up, thar! What be ye skimmerin' roun' hyar fur?"

"Brother, I am one of Storm-Cloud's warriors," was the reply, in very clear English.

"Wal, what in hurl—I mean Halifax—do ye want hyar?"

"I would talk with my white brother."

"Would ye?"

"I have spoken."

"I heerd ye say nuthin', but of you've spoke, why d'ye want ter keep on spokin'?"

"Brother, I would talk with you privately."

"Lund o' Goshen—I mean, jest so, jes' so. Ain't ye talkin' with me private? Don't be so egregious—so moral sly an' secret. Speak right out, Injun! I'm a white man, an' my heart is big as a full moon. Say your little verse, Sioux!"

Yank did not find it easy to drop his characteristic forms of speech, but he did his best.

"Brother, you a soldier of the White Father," pursued the Indian, with dignity.

"No, I ain't, fur I've cut an' run. I'm a free agent, an' a universal slasher. I'm a shootin' comet on a tower. Want ter take lessons in military tick-tacks? My grandfather was a Revolutionary relix—that is, I be one; an' not that, either, but I wear the blue, you see. I consait you ketch on, though it's mixed up like hurl—Halifax, I mean."

"My white brother is a jolly dog, and I think he don't care very much who he serves as long as he rakes in the tin."

"Hullo! strikes me you are an atrocious funny Injun!" quoth Yank, suspiciously.

"I am no more an Indian than you are, though I have gone in Storm-Cloud's band for two years. To express it bluntly, I am a renegade. I turned my back on my race and color, some time ago, and became as near an Indian as nature would allow."

"Mister, why do you tell me this?"

"I have a motive. How would you like to become rich at one bound—marvelously rich?"

"I reckon ef that was a chance, my 'bound' would be a big one, by hurl—Halifax!"

"You have deserted the army; would you desert Nolaw!"

"You are gettin' on del'kit ground now. I'll trouble you ter keep yer promise an' do some talkin'; don't make me do it all. I can't tell yer story for ye."

Nevermiss was really perplexed.

"I will explain in few words. I lately discovered a gold-mine which I know is good for at least one-quarter of a million. I have decided to abandon Storm-Cloud and get rich. In yonder hut is a woman named Agnes Prior. I want her for my wife. To get her, I must have your aid, and I make this proposal to you: Let us both desert the allies, wrest the Prior woman from Nolaw, and go to my mine. I will give you one-half of the gold obtained on condition that you join me, help me secure Agnes, and then give her wholly to me. There is the proposal. What do you say?"

The white Indian spoke earnestly, and Yank grounded his musket, crossed his hands over the muzzle and looked as earnestly at his companion.

"I've b'en a sojer twenty-odd year," he deliberately replied, "an' fit all sorts o' atrocious insex—I mean hostyle critters—an' I'm as wal up in the tick-tacks o' war as the next one; but I'll be thrashed ef that ain't the most singularest proposal I ever heerd. It is, by—Halifax!"

"Isn't it fair?"

"Fair! It's prodigal! it's lavish! One-half o' a gold-mine o' fable-ous richness. Ain't got a bushel er so o' nuggets in yer vest-pocket, fur samples, hev ye?—an' I can't expeck 'em in yer vest-pocket, neither, fur ye don't seem ter wear any clo'se ter speak on."

"I have no sample, whatever, but the gold-mine will speak for itself."

"Does it speak English?"

"It speaks the language of gold."

"Land o' Go— I mean, land o' gold. You tickle my ear; you do, by mighty! One-half fur me!"

"Yes."

"No mortgage on the mine?"

"It is known only to me."

"Mister, you tempt me sore. I ain't parfict, an' I hev my leetle weaknesses. When I go ter the settlements an' see a chap amblin' round in a swaller-tail coat, tall hat, shiny boots, cane an' eye-glass, my narvous system rises right up in envy. I'd druther be such a chap as that than a peacock—I had, sure as you live."

"All this you can be."

"Moreover, I ain't so very much in love with military tick-tacks. Blue cloth is sorter pooty, but the egregious Injuns will use it as a targit, an' when a man is a deserter, the t'other blue-coats are apt ter take a shy at him."

"If you remain with Nolaw, your life will be one of great and constant peril. Abandon him, and become rich at a bound."

Yank glanced at the lieutenant's quarters. He and his fellow-deserter were still talking and laughing.

"You say the idee is fur you an' me ter pitch in like hurl—I mean Halifax—an' lick Nolaw, an' then take the female an' skedaddle!"

"Exactly."

"Nolaw has a man with him."

"We are good for two men."

"Land o' Goshen! yes, I should say so. Mister, give me yer hand. Your offer seems ter me like a benevolent scheme all through, an' the pedigree o' the Yel— That is ter say, I'm all ready."

"Good! Now let me say that I think prompt action necessary."

"So do I."

"You will be relieved presently?"

"In' bout an' hour," Yank confidently asserted.

"Then why not move at once?"

"An' egregious good idee."

"Then hear my plan. Do you call Nolaw to the door, and, the moment he gets there, I'll cover him with my revolver. At the same time, you draw a bead on his companion."

This plan did not suit Yank, who knew that Nolaw would recognize him as a bogus soldier, even if his true identity was not revealed, the moment that his face was exposed to strong light. This must be avoided.

"No," he replied. "Decoy Nolaw ter the door an' overpower him without givin' him a chance ter call out, an' then when his friend comes ter investigate, sarve him the same way."

"Will it work?"

"To be sure."

"Well, we'll try it. Are you ready?"

"I be, mister."

Yank smiled grimly as he thought how his present companion was being deceived. He proposed to make the white Indian a tool in the rescue of Agnes, and then deprive him of all the fruits of the victory. The gold-mine he set down as a concoction and fraud—in any case, it had no charm for him. All he wished was to rescue Agnes, and the renegade had no claims to good usage.

They consulted for awhile, and then proceeded to put their plan into effect. The renegade took place at one side of the entrance, and Yank, barely exposing one blue-clad arm behind the blanket, asked Nolaw to step to the door. Promptly and unsuspectingly the lieutenant obeyed, but as he came out the renegade, who was an extremely muscular man, seized him by the throat and swung him off his feet. He was laid upon the ground without the utterance of a word of alarm.

Yank let the blanket fall fully, and then sprung forward with the ready cords. In a very brief space of time, Nolaw was bound and gagged.

This success encouraged the singularly-matched allies, and they decided to attack the second man in the same way at once. Yank again brushed the blanket a little aside, showing his arm but not his face, and informed the man that "the lieutenant" wanted to see him. The trap worked well, and the victim was ready. He came out, and, in a very short time, was tied up and laid beside his superior—and all without an alarm.

The renegade slapped Yank upon the shoulder.

"Ha, ha! my bully soldier boy; how's that? I don't want to boast, but I'll bet something you haven't the muscle these arms of mine possess."

"I dar' say not. I'm rayther weak, o' the two. Used ter be strong enough, but army life never did agree with me. It's sapped my animal muskle, an' gi'n me a turn o' the newrol—I mean, o' the roomatic fever, the wu'st way. Now, s'posen you go in an' get the woman? I'll wait byar. But, hold on! Your Injun exterior will scare the wits out o' her. Can't you scrub off the wu'st on't?"

"No need of that; I'll simply tell her I am a white man in disguise, and my voice will prove it. I'll convince her I came here as a friend—Wait! I have the idea. I'll say I come from Yank Yellowbird. I'll tell her Yank and I are working together, and that he's just outside the door. How's that? Ha, ha! Won't that be a rich joke?"

"It will, by burley!" the mountaineer agreed, chuckling.

"And when she comes, you pretend to be Yank, eh?"

"I will, ef ye say so."

"I do say it. Here I go—Indian to look at, but, really, Yank Yellowbird's ally. Ha, ha! Best joke of the season!"

Laughing again, the renegade entered the hut, while Nevermiss looked after him, nodded, and muttered:

"I'll be condemn'd ef it ain't a pooty fair sort o' a joke!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

TOO LATE!

YANK did some rapid thinking when left alone. He had intended to continue the deception on the renegade until they were outside the deserters' camp, but there was great danger that the exposure might occur before he wished, by Agnes recognizing him, and so near to the larger hut that the sleeping men would be awakened and alarmed.

Such being the case, he decided that the best place to settle the matter with his temporary ally was right in Nolaw's hut. The result would

soon be known, and the worst encountered. Acting on this theory he entered the hut. He was just in time to hear his name quickly spoken by Agnes.

"Yank!" she cried. "Yank, near at hand?"

"Yes, madam; just outside," the renegade replied. "He's waiting for you, and the quicker we get away the better."

"I am all ready."

"Then come on!"

There was a rustle in the inner room, and the white Indian appeared, a grin on his face. He was not yet through relishing his "joke." Agnes came quickly forward, and at sight of Yank she hurried forward and caught his hand.

"Oh! Yank—dear old Yank!" she exclaimed, "this is happiness indeed! You came like an angel from paradise!"

"I ain't one, leetle woman," the mountaineer good-humoredly replied. "You never see an angel rigged out in such a blue suit as this, or ef ye did, I consait it didn't fit so monstrous bad. I never'll admit that I am an angel when my trowsers don't reach more'n four inches below my knees, an' thar is loose cloth enough 'round my waist ter make a baby a winter duster. But this ain't ter the p'int. Mister, do you smell any rats or mice?"

The speaker leaned upon his musket and looked fixedly at the renegade. The latter had seemed surprised when Agnes so readily accepted his "ally" as Yank Yellowbird, and the last question brought a look of uneasiness to his face.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that your leetle joke is double-barreled, an' that this young woman ain't taken in half so much as you be. In brief, mister, I am the real, ginerine Yank Yellowbird!"

"What?"

"Jes' so."

"You are joking."

"Not a bit on't."

"But—your uniform—"

"I borred it of a sojer I tackled, tied up an' chucked into the bushes; an' then I took his place, as I was wal qualified ter do, sence my gran'father was posted in military tick-tacks. Now, mister, you hev bragged about your muskle, so I'll give ye a chance ter try it ag'in' a weak critter like me!"

Yank set his musket up against the wall and grasped the renegade by the arm. The latter was dumfounded, and temporarily incapable of action, but by this time his wits had returned. He realized that his "ally" was telling the truth, and saw the snare into which he had run through his own scheming. He was, however, a thoroughly brave man, and with a fierce exclamation he grappled with the tall mountaineer.

Another moment and they were staggering back and forth, locked in a close, but far from friendly, embrace.

Agnes clasped her hands and stood looking on like one in a nightmare. The repeated scenes of strife and danger she had witnessed had preyed upon her until it seemed to her she could bear no more. Every nerve was in active revolt, yet some other power neutralized this, and she stood like a statue and watched with dilated eyes and a face from which nearly all color had receded.

Yank Yellowbird was beset with no such fears. He knew that the renegade was a muscular man, yet he went into the fight with confidence.

In grim silence, and with every muscle strained to the utmost, the two fought on. The renegade's first confidence was gone. Yank's grasp was almost like that of a grizzly bear; his quickness of motion would have done credit to a man of half his years; and every effort made by the white Indian to throw him was a failure.

But the end was near, and it came abruptly.

One moment the renegade was on his feet, and his chances seemed as good as ever; the next, he was lying flat upon his back and Yank was kneeling upon him. The victory was won, just as was to be expected, but the mountaineer was afraid that his prisoner would cry out.

He drew a knife.

"Not a word!" he ordered, in deep, stern tones, scarcely recognizable as genial Yank Yellowbird's. "Ef you screech I'll do suthin' desp'rit—I will, by burley!"

And he waved the weapon before the renegade's eyes.

That person, however, was not a fool. He knew the tall veteran well by reputation, and had no desire to invite death by any stubborn course. He promptly replied:

"I surrender!"

"An' won't screech?"

"Not a screech."

"I shall hev ter tie ye, as I did the rest."

"I haven't a word to say," groaned the prisoner. "It is pretty rough, and—my cursed stupidity will make me sore of mind for many a day to come, but I'll take my bitters like a little man. I am not fool enough to defy Yank Yellowbird, when I'm the under dog in the fight."

"You may be a dog, mister, but I'll be thrashed ef I owh up ter bein' one o' the specious, bottom or top. How'sever, that don't

count. You act wise, an' no harm shall come ter you. Agnes, I'll trouble ye ter toss them cards this way."

Mrs. Prior's mind had taken a turn for the better, and she promptly obeyed. Yank bound the renegade without delay, an operation to which the latter submitted very quietly. He was deeply chagrined, but knew better than to dare Yank's wrath.

The mountaineer arose.

"Thar! I consait our job is done, an' that we'd better be goin'. I s'pose we might stay an' tie up the rest o' the village, but we've got a lively sprinklin' on 'em a'ready, an' I reckon it'll do. Pale-face Injuns, farewell! I hope you you an' me may never meet in hostyle combat, fur I've injoyed your society, an' I took a heap o' pleasure in your *leettle joke*. I did, by hurley! Agnes, we'll go!"

They passed outside the hut, and the blanket was dropped behind them. It occurred to Yank that Nolaw and his follower were left in a place by far too public, so he conveyed them to the rear of the building and stowed them away close to the wall.

"Are we ready to go?" asked Agnes, anxiously.

"We will be d'reckly. Afore we go I must git my rifle, which is over by the cliff, an' while I'm thar I'll cast off this blue raiment. Don't think I was ever intended fur a mil'tary man; the tick-tacks don't come nat'r'le ter me; an' thar is too much newrolgy in my j'ints; an' my left foot is sech a weak sister it would git skeered when the order come to 'advance', an' run like hurley. I consait I kin best uphold the Yellowbird pedigree by stickin' ter private life."

The mountaineer waved his hand and hurried away. He was gone only a few moments, and when he returned he had his own rifle again, and had cast off the odious uniform.

"Did I tell ye," he continued, "that one o' your other frien's is waitin' outside the camp?"

"No," Agnes replied.

"He is."

"Who is it?" she asked, with manifest interest.

"Richard Prior."

"Ahl!"

She drew a quick, involuntary breath which spoke a language of its own as plain to Yank as words.

"The lad has taken a good eal of interest in the matter," he added, "an' b'en right willin' ter risk his life ter rescue you."

The veteran was too wise to say more, and there the matter rested. Agnes had nothing to say; her mind had been given new food for thought, and she was confused. More than that, she felt hope which she had tried in vain to crush back as unfounded. Richard had done his best for her when in the cave, and was still ready to help her—but would he not have done the same for any imperiled woman? She tried to crush down what might be vain hopes.

Half an hour after Yank and Agnes left the place there were new signs of life in the deserters' camp. A human figure moved slowly and cautiously through the dark surroundings, its mode of locomotion being upon hands and knees. Slowly it crept on, making frequent pauses, its gaze being fixed intently upon Lieutenant Nolaw's hut. Many minutes were consumed in the advance, for the prowler did not expect to find the way so clear, and the fact that he saw no one made him suspicious of a trap.

He reached the door at last, however, and, brushing the blanket a little aside, peered cautiously ahead.

The prowler was Old Porcupine.

He had expected to see Nolaw, but what he did see surprised and puzzled him. The only visible person was one who seemed to be a Sioux Indian, and he lay upon his back, bound hand and foot, but rubbing his hands back and forth on the floor, which was made of small timbers with one side hewn to a degree of flatness, in an evident attempt to chafe his bonds apart.

Old Porcupine rubbed his eyes and stared blankly. What did it mean? The scene was very different from what he had expected.

For several seconds he considered the matter, but as he marked the various signs of a struggle, he determined to enter the hut at once, and boldly. He had a troublesome theory as to the state of affairs.

This decision arrived at, he entered promptly. He was at once seen by the white Sioux, who suspended operations, but Lefferts cared nothing for him then. He sought the door to the inner room. One glance was enough to show that it was vacant. Dark with passion grew his face, and he turned fiercely to the Sioux.

"What does this hyar mean?" he demanded.

The man mumbled something, and then Lefferts saw that he was gagged. He tore out the obstacle unceremoniously.

"Now, speak!" he ordered.

"Yank Yellowbird has been here!" the renegade promptly replied.

"Flames o' perdition! will I never hear the last o' that long-legged meddler? Always Yank Yellowbird! The scoundrel is the curse of my life. But what has happened?"

"Liberate me, and I will tell."

Lefferts promptly cut his bonds.

"The long and short of it is," the white Sioux explained, "Yellowbird has been here and won the game. He overpowered Nolaw and tied him up; then he served me the same way; and then he took the Prior woman and cleared out."

"Too late!" groaned Old Porcupine.

"You do seem to be left; but such is life. Try to bear it philosophically. I do, when I lose a game."

"Seems ter me you're a queer Injun."

"Just now I am; but I shall be a queerer one to-morrow. I am about to cut stick and run—desert. Will you go along, my hearty?"

"Not I! I hev work ter do hyar."

"Still bound to win Agnes, eh? All right, my boy; you can do as you please; but this is my last act in Siouxdom. I am going to skip. I owe you thanks for freeing me, so I'll wish you good luck in your attempt. Honest Peter, let me shake your hand!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WORD OF ALARM.

No trouble was experienced by Yank, Prior and Agnes in reaching the cave. The mountaineer used his usual precautions, and, though he saw a few Sioux by the way, he avoided all dangers with characteristic skill. Once during the previous day he had visited the cave, so, though it had been over twenty hours since he first set out, it had been less since he seen Border Bullet and the rest.

Passing behind the waterfall, the trio entered the passage. Not far had they gone when a warning growl sounded in Moses's well-known tones, and Yank gave the customary signal. It was promptly answered, and Border Bullet came hurrying to meet them.

It was a joyful reunion, and the Sharpshooter shook each of the new-comers heartily by the hand, while Moses, after a little deliberation, decided to relax a little of his dignity, and claimed attention from his master with considerable exuberance.

Inez and Abigail had been awakened, and the former came quickly forward to greet Agnes. Miss Longstreeter, however, only condescended to sit up on her blanket, and she looked at them through her spectacles with relentless intensity. It was her own opinion that some of the party had been "drinkin'", and she only awaited a favorable opportunity to express her views.

"Hyar we be once more," quoth Nevermiss, as he set his rifle up against the wall, "an' I would be quite contented ef only Guv'nor was with us. Dunno what has become o' that little varmint, by hurley. Hope he ain't got inter no tribulations. It's bad he ain't hyar, fur I allow we would make a bold push fur civilized parts ef our party was all tergether; but we can't desert Guv'nor—that's settled."

"It is a great pity he is missing," answered Prior.

"I consait so."

"What do you intend to do, Nevermiss?" asked Border Bullet.

"The only way is ter look fur him as I've done for t'others."

"And stay here!"

"I s'pose so."

"I have reason to believe this is no longer a place of safety."

"How so?"

"Miss Longstreeter is quite sure that she saw an Indian peering over into the place where our horses are kept, just before dark."

"Hullo!—that so?"

"Unfortunately, it is."

"How was it?"

"She wandered into the north passage, and went on until she reached the valley. Accordin' to our custom I had turned our horses out shortly before, and they were then there. She was looking up when she saw the head and shoulders of an Indian. They were quickly withdrawn, but not soon enough for secrecy."

"Be you sure your eyes didn't deceive ye, Miss Longstepper?" asked Yank, gravely.

"Sir," retorted the maiden lady, indignantly, "I will have no aspersions cast onter my eyes. I guess they're as good as yours, an' they're a heap han'somer. In Cloveryard, Connecticut, I hev always b'en noted fur my visual optics, sir. I thank my stars I hev never injured my eyes by drinkin's an' carousin's, like some I could name."

"Land o' Goshen! I wa'n't castin' no insinuations on your eyes," Yank good-humoredly replied. "I couldn't, fur they are bright as diamond's; but all o' us—"

"I hope nobody here has b'en drinkin'" pursued the lady, severely, as she waved her cane at her companions. "I know whatrum will do, an' the sisters o' the Anti-Demon-of-Drink Society will tell ye I have always made heroical efforts ter tread the monster under foot, an' raise the wicked from the gutter. But they won't be raised, fur man's abnormal condition is in the gutter; an' he's there, too; an' he will keep on drinkin'. Oh! the depravity o' man! Oh! the power o' iniquitous rum! Oh! the woes o' women, an' the pangs they endure! Oh! the fiery pits that yawn for man! Oh! oh!"

And the great orator rolled her eyes and waved her cane until Moses broke forth in lugubrious howls.

"She's got 'em ag'in!" quoth Yank, shaking his head mournfully. "Miss Longtounger has got 'em ag'in, an' she's got 'em bad. Land o' Goshen! ef we had a block o' marble hyar, an' a chisel, an' a sculptor, I'll be thrashed ef I wouldn't like ter set him at work an' let him sculp Miss Longnecker. I would, by hurley! Oh! oh!"

Miss Abigail bristled with anger, but Yank turned abruptly away and gravely added:

"Border Bullet, ef the atrocious red insex hev got a clew it is sartainly serious. I thought, bein' the pasture-lot was so cut off by gulches, thar wa'n't much danger o' our ho'ses bein' see'd, ef allowed ter graze only at sartain hours, but the Injuns are parseverin' creetur's; they may hev got the clew."

"I am afraid they have. I investigated, and though the nature of the place was against me—there was no earth; only a ledge, partially covered with moss—I learned that something, man or beast, had lately been there. The moss showed abrasions very easy to see."

Yank stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"I dunno but we ought ter git away at once, but I hate ter go afore Guv'nor is found, 'specielly as I don't know o' any other good hidin' place nigh at hand."

"I fear we are risking a good deal by remaining here," Border Bullet answered.

"Logic, ev'ry word on't—sound logic."

"Of course it is for you to decide."

"Your idees ain't ter be picked ter pieces often, lad. You hev see'd sev'ral years of life on the prairie, as man an' boy, an' thar are few whose judgment I value more'n yours. I consait you knows the ins an' outs right wal, an' I'm glad ye do. Now, hows'er, we're all workin' in the dark."

"Our prisoners, the deserters you so scientificaly drilled, have also asserted that the allies have the clew. This I believe to be empty talk, however."

"I hope you've kep' them sojer-chaps ignorant."

"We have. They are in the niche where you put them, and can hear and see nothing."

"We want ter keep 'em thar. An' now I want a gin'ral expression of opinion. I hate ter take ye out ag'in, fur we may run afoul the Injuns, so I'm ready ter hear opinions, for an' against."

Every one at first declined to give an opinion, preferring to leave all to the mountaineer, but he insisted, and a general discussion followed. Border Bullet and Prior were in favor of making a bold push to escape, while the women, though slow to advance any ideas, seemed to think that a shelter, however poor, was better than to cast themselves adrift again.

The discussion was still in progress when a sound at the entrance caused Yank and Border Bullet to start abruptly. It was the signal used by them to announce their home-coming at critical times, and it certainly meant something now. Yank seemed to have a clear theory, for he answered promptly, and then a tall figure advanced with long, strong, yet singularly light steps.

Abigail uttered a screech and fled into the remote part of the cave, but Yank started forward instead of back.

The new-comer was an Indian of large stature, and Border Bullet at once recognized Mountain Eagle. The friendly warrior waved his hand in a dignified way.

"How-de-do, chief; how-de-do!" saluted the mountaineer. "You're welcome ter our house, an' not ter ours, either, fur this place is only one we occupy free o' rent. Make yerself at home. I'll offer a cheer, but our furniture ain't come yet."

"Nevermiss," replied the chief, in a deep voice, "the stag does not gaze when the prairie is burning."

"I consait not; he'd git his egregious nose scorched ef he did. He would, by hurley!"

"Is he wiser than man?"

"Sometimes; at other times, no."

"The Great Spirit has given man reasoning faculties and the power of hearing. If one sense tells him a volcano is muttering under his feet, the other should teach him that safety lies only in flight."

The chief spoke gravely and deliberately, but his gaze had wandered from Yank's face to that of Inez. He put more force to his voice and added:

"The heart of man may grow hard with evil as the winter turns water to ice, but his eyes are never blind to what is fair to look upon."

"In plain words, Mountain Eagle, you advise us ter pack our bandboxes an' skip, eh?"

"My brother can read the language of the Indian."

"I consait I kin. You an' me ain't no strangers. Many the time we've set by the camp-fire terger; an' follered the deer, the buff'ler an' the b'ar; an' many the time some atrocious insex has follered us. But that ain't ter the p'int. What is the danger?"

"The eyes of the Sioux are sharp, and Storm-Cloud's young men have come to him with tales dangerous to Nevermiss and his friends. The secret of this refuge is a secret no longer, and if

Nevermiss remains here all the Sioux will be knocking at his door before morning."

"They kin knock an' be condemn'd!" declared Yank, frowning. "They won't find us hyar. Let 'em knock, an' then come in. Ef we cook breakfast, ter-morrow, it won't be in this country hotel."

"My white brother speaks wisely, as a warrior should do. Let him take his people and go, and Mountain Eagle will help him."

Yank's expression grew grave.

"Is 't safe, Injun?"

"There will be danger for the men and women of pale-faces at every step, and more strong arms are needed than they can count. Mountain Eagle has spoken; he will go with them. Listen! Toward the south, not further than the measure of two miles as the crow flies, another cave awaits you. Many an hour has the Indian searched, but the refuge was not found until to-day. It now awaits our coming—let us go!"

The mountaineer's face had brightened. It was plain that he considered the addition of the chief to their party a most important measure, and the spirit of hope was contagious. All were impressed with the idea that Mountain Eagle was a most valuable ally, and his knowledge of the ground would be of great help.

Yank and the chief consulted further. The chief obstacle in the way of success was to get the horses away safely. Mountain Eagle said that the hills along the north side of the lake were so full of Sioux that it would be folly, and worse, to try and pass them; and he had brought a canoe which, with the one already at hand, would carry all the human beings over. But the horses would be needed when once across, and it would not do to part from them.

The leaders decided that Yank should take charge of the animals, leading them along the shore, or swimming them, as prevailing circumstances demanded; while Mountain Eagle accompanied the fugitives.

This plan was far from being to the taste of the rest of the party, and each face grew grave at the idea of parting with Yank, but the latter took occasion to speak with them unheard by Mountain Eagle.

"I want yer ter trust the chief as you would me," he said, "fur I tell ye he's worthy on't. He's young, but Injuns go on the war-path afore they're six weeks ago, so the Eagle counts a good twenty-five years o' experience. He's as brave as a tiger, an' when it comes ter cunnin', the hull Sioux nation can't outwit him. Trust him fully, fur I answer fur him as I would fur myself."

It would have been impossible to convince his followers that any man could fill his place, but they made no remonstrance. All liked the appearance of Mountain Eagle, and he met with no opposition. True, Miss Abigail indulged in a series of shivers, but her fears were of actual value—she forgot for the time to assert that anybody had been "drinkin'," which was a great relief.

The horses were brought out of the interior and prepared for the venture. They were not to be led out until it was known that the party could get under way. The two deserters must be left where they were.

All preparations having been completed, the start was made.

Mountain Eagle went first, and reported that no Indians were near. This was not strange, as only the rear entrance had been found. Then all the party passed the falling water, and their hazardous attempt was fully begun.

They reached the water in safety, and the canoes were duly produced. Mountain Eagle, Agnes and Abigail were to go in one craft, and Border Bullet, Prior and Inez in the other. Moses was included in the list of passengers.

Yank waved his hand, and then the chief and Border Bullet dipped their paddles, and the canoes moved out upon the lake.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TRouble on the Lake.

BORDER BULLET propelled his canoe after the foremost craft with the utmost care. The loud sound of a paddle at that moment might ruin all, for the red enemy certainly were not far away. But he had more than this to think of. He was very skillful with a paddle for a white man of his years, but he felt called upon to do extra good work while Mountain Eagle handled the other canoe.

Before they had gone two fathoms he knew that the chief was a marvel.

All looked back at Yank. One moment the mountaineer's tall form was visible; then he turned back, and the darkness hid him from view.

Border Bullet was far from being as calm as he should be. It seemed almost impossible for Yank to get the horses away unseen. The Sioux were thick among the hills, and if they were on their guard, how was Yank to run the gauntlet in safety? Had there been only men in the party, the Sharpshooter would have taken place beside his friend, and shared his dangers with far more equanimity than he now felt.

He remembered, however, the rare skill and

sagacity of the veteran, and tried to think only of his own duties.

The darkness had not abated, and there was little fear that the canoes would be seen, unless other persons were on the lake. There was danger of this, and due caution was used. The work of the Indian was remarkable; only his movements showed when he dipped his paddle, and the buoyant canoe seemed to float like a feather.

Skill like this Border Bullet could not equal, but he did remarkable well.

They proceeded without any mishap until near the middle of the lake, when Moses, who had behaved in his usual calm way, suddenly manifested uneasiness. He arose in the canoe, directed his attention to the front, and began to analyze the air with all the exactness that his nostrils would allow.

Accustomed to the ways of the intelligent animal, Border Bullet at once shared his uneasiness. He looked sharply ahead, but failed to see or hear anything. Then a growl broke from the dog's lips, and the Sharpshooter saw his teeth gleam in the darkness.

Mountain Eagle raised his paddle and held up one hand to call for silence.

The sound of a paddle was distinctly heard by both men.

The chief gave one brief order.

"To the islands!" he said quietly.

They were near the formations in question, and the canoes were at once propelled that way. Mountain Eagle could have paddled rapidly and observed the same secrecy, but he was careful not to set a pace which would lead Border Bullet to splash water unduly. They reached the northern side of the largest island in safety, and the chief found a place where the canoes could be brought under the bushes in such a way that the occupants could remain in them and still be concealed by the drooping boughs.

"We bes' wait awhile," he said, falling into broken English.

"Did you see anything?" Border Bullet asked.

"No."

"Yet, the enemy must be out."

"Yes."

"Is there danger that they will search here?"

"Maybe so."

"Surely, they would not expect us to take refuge on the islands."

"They know Nevermiss is wily as a fox and full of tricks. When men fight the great mountaineer, they never know what he do."

"The paddle sounds louder."

"They comin' this way."

"Have you any orders?"

Mountain Eagle glanced at Moses.

"The dog! He growl once—maybe, growl again. If Sioux hear him, there be trouble."

"Do not fear, friend Eagle. Moses knows when to growl and when not to. It is his fashion to give warning, but once tell him to be silent, and he will be like one dumb."

The young man laid one hand upon the animal's shoulder.

"Be still, good Moses; be still!" he directed.

Not a vibration of Moses's tail, nor a turn of his head, indicated that he heard, but, though his attention was keenly fixed upon the suspicious quarter, he seemed to become like a statue.

The sound of paddles was now more distinct, and Mountain Eagle again spoke:

"Me go look. Stay here. I not be far away."

Before the last words had fairly passed his lips he was gone from the canoe. He might almost have been a phantom for all the noise he made. The leaves scarcely rustled—he said and was gone.

Border Bullet beheld the movement with renewed uneasiness, he had not been given chance to oppose it.

Mountain Eagle glided along toward the end of the island. Before he reached the point the sound of paddling had ceased and he was not surprised at what he saw when he reached a desirable place and parted the leaves.

Two canoes lay side by side only a few yards away, and each was well filled with Sioux warriors.

They were in consultation, and though Mountain Eagle could hear nothing that was said, it was plain that they had something of more than ordinary importance to engage their attention. The chief, however, was quite sure that they had not seen the other canoes. If they had, they would have pursued rapidly, instead of remaining idle there.

They soon began to make gestures toward the islands, and Mountain Eagle's decision was promptly made. He suspected that a search of the islands was to take place, and, if so, the sooner the fugitive canoes left the place, the better.

He made his way back to his charges.

"We will go," said he, quietly.

"Wait!" Border Bullet replied; "there is a canoe on the other side—below us."

"Wah!"

The exclamation passed the Indian's lips quietly enough, but he was far from being satisfied with the situation.

"Where are they?" he added.

"Look through the bushes, and you can see the craft just off the lower point of the island."

Mountain Eagle obeyed, and he saw all that was promised. Another canoe was there, as stationary as those above. He let the bushes fall back into place. For a moment there was silence between the fugitives, and the chief had a momentous question to solve. Direct retreat was out of the question, for they could not leave their cover without being seen. There were two ways left. They must cross the island, conveying their canoes with them, or remain in hiding and trust to Providence.

The matter was quickly decided. The sound of paddles suddenly became audible again, and it was clear that one craft was passing down the southern side of the island.

"We stay here!" the chief briefly added.

"As you will, Mountain Eagle; we trust to you."

Border Bullet tried to speak cheerfully, but he doubted his success. Every moment was giving him increased confidence in their guide, but the odds seemed terribly against them. In case of discovery, their chances would certainly be next to hopeless. He looked at the women. Inez and Agnes were singularly calm outwardly, but Miss Longstreeter was plainly a badly-frightened woman. Richard Prior was quiet, but calm.

"Let my friends be brave," continued Mountain Eagle, presently. "The Sioux will search the island, but I do not think they will find us. They will not waste time to look all around the island under the bushes. Be calm, and speak no word."

There was another pause, and then the barely audible crackling of dry sticks showed that the Sioux were on the island.

"Oh! massyful Providence!" lamented Miss Abigail. "I wish I was back in Cloveryard, Connecticut! The sins o' the wicked—the wine-bibbers an' the carousers—are fallin' heavily upon them who is righteous at heart like me, an' the—"

Mountain Eagle laid his broad hand upon the woman's arm.

"Be still, or me take your scalp!" he ordered, in a voice which seemed to freeze her blood.

"O-o-oh!"

It would have been a screech if the temperance orator could have summoned lung-power enough, but she feared Mountain Eagle nearly as much as she did the other Indians; but his threat literally frightened her into dumbness for the time. She cowered back, and said no more.

The chief whispered to Border Bullet and then left the canoe. Gaining the bank he stretched his muscular form out in a position almost prostrate, yet in such a way that he could readily meet any foe.

Border Bullet laid down his paddle and held his knife instead, with his revolver close to hand. He would gladly have spoken to console Inez and Agnes, but it would have been reckless folly to utter any words then. Prior followed his example.

The noises on the island, slight though each was, increased. It was plain that a more or less thorough search was being made. The canoe at the west kept its place and still shut off retreat. And escape in any form seemed almost impossible. Either their flight from the cave was known, or the Sioux suspected that such a movement would be made. In any case, the fugitives were practically surrounded, and if the searchers used the skill for which their race was noted, discovery appeared certain.

Once discovered, what chance would the fugitives have?

All these thoughts occurred to Border Bullet, but, as he worried only for the women, his usual coolness did not desert him. He was prepared to do his part, and his was a clear, steady head.

Nearer came the searchers—nearer yet! One, at least, was only a few yards away, and his slow movements were strikingly panther-like in point of stealth and caution.

What would be the result?

Border Bullet grasped his knife more tightly, and glanced toward Mountain Eagle. The darkness hid the chief, and there was no sign of life near him.

At this moment a single rifle-report sounded on the air, coming from a distance. The exact locality the Sharpshooter could not distinguish, though he believed it to be west of the lake, but the peculiar sound of the rifle he did know—it was Yank Yellowbird's.

Here was another cause for anxiety, and at a critical moment; the tall mountaineer would not have risked a shot except in a case of extreme necessity. What misfortune had befallen him? There could be no answer then, and no second report followed.

Then all of Border Bullet's attention turned to the island. The nearest Sioux had advanced until only a few steps away, and he was on the very edge of the land. Was it possible to escape the notice of his keen, trained eyes?

And Mountain Eagle! He lay in the very path of the searcher. Obviously, a collision must occur.

One step more, and then the chief arose as quickly and silently as though operated by machinery. It was something almost marvelous. The prowler started back, but he was too late. Mountain Eagle's strong hands were upon him, and he was borne to the ground as though he were but a child.

"Would he be as easily subdued?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

MOUNTAIN EAGLE quickly settled the last question. The captured Sioux was beneath his knee, and there he remained. There was a struggle—only slight—not enough to alarm his nearest companions—but sufficient to spread consternation among the occupants of the boat. Inez turned her head away, and Agnes covered her face with her hands.

Border Bullet would have spared them that most gladly. Like them he thought that the warrior's life had been sacrificed, but Mountain Eagle suddenly turned his head.

"Have you a rope, Sharpshooter?" he asked.

"I believe there is one of some sort here."

"Let me have it."

Border Bullet found the article in question tied around a package, but it was no time to hesitate. He tore it away, and passed it over to the chief. There was new cause for hope. The other searchers were moving away, and if no return-search was made, escape was possible. The chief was busy over his captive for a while, and then he became motionless.

The young hunter could not but notice the desire to avoid the shedding of blood by both Mountain Eagle and Yank. He remembered how the mountaineer had silenced an Indian on that very island a few nights before, and that he had afterward said that he merely left the man stunned. There were times when Nevermiss had no choice, but if he could show mercy he did it, even when the enemy sought his own life.

All sounds ceased on the island. There was a lull, and then a second canoe appeared beside the one waiting off the shore. An order was given, and both proceeded toward the northern bluffs. A little later the third craft followed, coming from the east end of the island, and every heart beat lighter.

To all appearances, that meant that the search was to be transferred to the mainland; probably the cave would soon be invaded.

Mountain Eagle turned back and re-entered his canoe.

"We go now," he said, quietly.

"No one will object," Richard Prior answered with a sigh.

"Chief," added Border Bullet, "did you hear the rifle shot?"

"My ears were open."

"Possibly you recognized it?"

"Yes."

"Has Yank met with trouble?"

"Nevermiss has met some foe, but he who can outwit the mountaineer must be more cunning than the fox. Many times have the seasons followed each other since he first went on the war-trail, and no one has yet taken the great white hunter's scalp. We may hope to meet him at the cliff where we are to wait."

This calm confidence encouraged all the others, and Mountain Eagle and Border Bullet used their paddles with vigor. There was little fear of meeting more foes on the lake, and speed became the main consideration. The canoes were driven briskly toward the southwest.

In due time they approached the shore, and a landing was made on a ledge. Then the chief found a proper place and secreted the canoes, and all was ready for the journey by land. Mountain Eagle led the way, and for nearly a hundred yards they were able to avoid stepping on the ground. When the ledge formation ceased the guide had other expedients to use, and Border Bullet knew that the trail they left would puzzle the best of the pursuers.

The point they hoped to meet Yank was nearly a mile from the lake, but this distance was soon passed. They neared the rendezvous, and then the veteran's well-known signal was heard and he appeared in the darkness.

"Hullo! hullo!" he exclaimed. "I thought, by hurley, you had got inter some egregious tribulation."

"We found Sioux along our course, brother," Mountain Eagle answered.

"Did they find you?"

"No."

"Twas ter be expected. I hate ter praise a man right afore his own eyes, Border Bullet, but when our red frien' sets out ter git the best o' any atrocious insex, he can come mortal nigh doin' it, anyhow."

"Praise from me would be useless, mountaineer, but the chief has ably proven the truth of your assertion."

"I consait so—'tis a way he has. Yank don't ketch him goin' back on his pedigree. The Yellowbirds o' the past ought ter knowed him, by hurley! All my ancestors would 'a' took to him, especially them who was named Adam, Noah, David an' Solomon. These were allowed ter be the pick o' my fam'ly in the early settle-

ments o' the country. Samson Yellowbird was egregious strong, but he got inter a fix by hevin' a female barber cut his hair, an' was never good fur much arterwards."

"Brother, we waste time," gravely observed the chief.

"Don't know but you're right, Eagle, an' we'll reform an' go on. The hosses are nigh at hand."

"Did you have trouble?" asked Border Bullet.

"Jest an artom; the inemy were poooty thick."

"We heard you fire."

"I did fire. One o' the varmints got badly in my way, an' give me no choice. I fired, an' I'm reellly afeerd he got hurt."

"Let us go," added Mountain Eagle. "The cave is not far away."

They proceeded in better spirits, and soon reached the new refuge. It was smaller than the cave they had left, and there was no grazing place for the horses; but as it would not do to part from these useful animals, it was decided to take them inside, and supply them with food from the grass-covered open spaces near at hand.

The men worked briskly bringing grass and wood, and at the end of half an hour they were well supplied in these respects. A fire had been started in the cave, and all gathered around it.

"I leave you now," said the chief.

"Goin' back ter your warriors, I take it, replied Yank.

"Nevermiss is right."

"I hope they won't suspect you, by hurley!"

"Fear not."

"I'd hate like the mischief ter have you git inter any egregious tribulation along of it, but we thank ye hearty. You an' I know what that means, fur we have folleder the prairies an' mountains enough so we onderstan' each other."

"The mountaineer speaks with a straight tongue, and Mountain Eagle knows his heart. I go now, and will look for the boy with the dusky skin. If he is near, he shall come back in safety."

"I'd like ter see Guv'nor, I admit, fur I consait the little varmint is-skeered 'most white. I shall look for him ter-morrer."

"Be wise, Nevermiss."

"I will, an' I'm liable ter be harmful ef any hostyle treads on my toes. Fack, by hurley!"

The chief turned to go, but Inez came forward and gave him her hand.

"Let me thank you, too. You have been brave and noble, and I shall always remember you with warm gratitude and admiration."

"Girl with the starry eyes," was the reply, "your words are pleasant to the Indian's ears. If all of your race were like you, there would be no warriors in the Sioux nations, for they would live only to be willing slaves. Farewell!"

He waved his hand, and then walked rapidly away.

"As fine an Injun as ever breathed!" quoth Nevermiss, with an emphatic nod.

"Have you known him long?" asked Prior.

"A good five year."

"It is odd that you should make a friend among those who are your bitter enemies."

"Nothin' is too strange ter be true. I consait ef my lamented ancestor, Adam Yellowbird, late of the Garden o' Eden, had b'en told his fam'ly would increase so like hurley, he would not hev believed it. Poor old Adam! I wish he's alive now, so I could take him out campin' with me, but I dar' say he'd be 'flicted with the newrolgy worse nor I be."

Inez was standing at one side, and Border Bullet joined her.

"You look out of spirits," he observed.

"I am out of spirits."

"Is our danger wearing upon you?"

"No; I am used to that. I was thinking."

"May I ask—of what?"

"Of you."

"Of me?" echoed the Sharpshooter, trying in vain to meet her gaze, for she looked only toward the rocky wall.

"Yes."

"I feel honored."

"Don't say that, for you are not sincere; you can't be. I was thinking of the strange chance which threw us together, and how you have worked as hard for me as though you had cause to honor, not despise me."

"Despise you! I certainly do not do that."

"Have you forgotten Yellow River?"

"No."

He was silent for a moment, and then he added:

"I have not forgotten it, and I am still anxious for an explanation. There was much there which I could not, do not, understand. I confess that I once thought of you bitterly, but since our last meeting I have had a chance to observe you even more carefully than I did at Yellow River. Then I was under the spell of love; in the last case, under the spell of bitter resentment, as I may say. Inez, I cannot think evil of you."

His voice had grown earnest, and he tried to take her hand, but she drew back.

"Not yet, not yet! Use your strong common-sense, and have absolute proof before you say that. I thank you for your kind words, and

they encourage me to make an explanation. Would you like to hear it?"

She looked at him with a faint smile.

"Would I?" he echoed. "Inez! it would take one-half the sorrow out of my life."

"I can surmise how you have been troubled," she softly replied. "I can see evidence of your desire to abandon the whole world, even in your name. Border Bullet! Who, here, knows your real name save me?"

"No one."

"I suspected as much. But I wander from the subject. I fear I should not speak, even now, were it not that late events have proved my father wholly without honor. Why do I say that? I have known what he was, all along, but when he turned against us and went over to Storm-Cloud's band, it was the last evil act, and one more than I could bear."

"You never knew my story—I will tell it now. My mother died when I was twelve years old. Thank Heaven, she never knew how bad my father was: but she did know he was a law-breaker in certain ways; she knew that he was liable to arrest at any time; but thought him, not really evil for the sake of evil, but because he was too weak to resist it. And before she died she made me promise sacredly that I would remain with him, help him in what was right, and try to influence him for his good."

"Don't ask me to tell in detail what followed. Little by little I learned the truth, and at the time you and I met at Yellow River I knew him to be guilty of every crime except that of murder. If he had done that, he kept the knowledge from me. We came to Yellow River as fugitives, yet, for a wonder, my father was not then guilty; circumstances made him seem to have been the ally of evil men in a lawless deed; and though I knew him to be innocent, I could not prove it."

"I had grown sick at heart sharing his desperate fortunes, knowing him to be a criminal, yet I remembered my promise to my mother and did not abandon him. And when we came to Yellow River I was, for once, in sympathy with him."

"We met you, and—you know what followed. But you do not know why we left Yellow River so suddenly, nor why—why I seemed to be so without human feeling."

Her voice had faltered.

"Go on!" exclaimed Border Bullet, eagerly.

"At first father took a fancy to you, and used you well, but his mood soon changed. Probably there was no good reason for the change, as such freaks on his part were common. I only knew what course he took. Without allowing me to suspect that he had turned against you for private reasons—or no reason—he came to me with a story which I now believe—nay, I know—to be false. He claimed to have definite knowledge that you were a detective; that you were hunting him down; that you sought my company only to entice me into confessions that would ruin him."

"You know what followed. I turned against you; I threw your friendship away; and then we left Yellow River as abruptly as we had come, unknown to any one, and leaving no clew to our destination. Now you know my story."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNSEEN MARKSMEN.

INEZ ceased speaking, but did not raise her downcast eyes. Border Bullet grasped her hand.

"Would to heaven you had told me this before!" he exclaimed.

"When could I tell you? Not at Yellow River, for I believed you to be a detective."

"And this belief clung to you?"

"Always, until we met here, as members of Yank Yellowbird's 'colony.' I did not like to regard you as one who would seek to secure a prisoner secretly, and then, to gain his object, assume a friendship for another which—

"I see!" Border Bullet interrupted. "In plain words, I tried to win your love, and then, one day, your father convinced you that I was a detective, and seeking your company only to trap him. You must have thought me an unconscionable villain."

"My mistake was in not suspecting that my father was deceiving me, wholly."

"We all err at times. It is very true that every story has two sides. And, Inez, what if this mistake had never occurred?"

He bent his head near hers, but she answered steadily:

"Do you remember what happened at Yellow River after we left?—what happened to you?"

"I was arrested for burglary."

"You were innocent, and you proved it."

"Yes."

"I know by what father has lately said to me that you at one time suspected that we were the burglars, and that we tried to fasten the crime upon you—wait! hear me out. There was something about a lost knife of yours, found in the store after the robbery. Now, let me say that I know nothing about the robbery; that I believe my father had no part in it; but, I do better believe he has later news from Yellow River than

you possess. Possibly he has heard of the arrest of the real culprit."

"In any case, my last doubt of you is gone, Inez, and I ask you to receive me like what I was once."

"Wait!" she replied, smiling archly. "We are once more friends, but let this investigation be made before I allow you to forgive me fully."

"Inez!"

"Mr. Border Bullet?" she retorted, still smiling.

"I must protest—"

"You must *not* protest. I am not going to allow it. Mountain Eagle has paid me a very pretty compliment, and made me vain, and now I am going to be tyrannical. I will allow no protests, but—you may be my friend!"

She held out her hand, and looked frankly into his eyes, smiling as she did so, and Border Bullet was satisfied.

A few minutes later Yank passed them, hurrying toward the cave entrance, and his manner was so indicative of something unusual that Border Bullet followed. He found the mountaineer standing in a listening attitude.

"What now, Nevermiss?" he asked.

"I've heerd the sound o' guns."

Just then there was a roar which was, clearly, the united reports of many guns.

"Egregious funny!" muttered Yank.

"I have a theory," quickly observed Border Bullet.

"What is it?"

"No men in the world can fire with the precision of that volley, with all weapons blended as one, except trained men. Nolaw and his followers are deserters. Can it be that judgment has come to them, and that they are attacked by other, and loyal, soldiers?"

"Land o' Goshen! I dunno but you've struck it; that is logic in that theory, by hurley. Look hyar, lad, we must know. Ef thar is true-blue sojers hyar, we want ter git their protection, right away, quick. You stay hyar, an' guard the cave, an' I'll find out."

Another volley made the rocks ring. The mountaineer hurried away, holding his rifle ready for use.

Yank had been gone but little more than five minutes when Border Bullet discovered a tall figure hurrying toward the entrance. It was not Yank, and the young man raised his rifle, but in a moment more the familiar signal sounded and he recognized Mountain Eagle. Nor was the chief alone; a slighter person was by his side, and another recognition followed.

The lost was found—Guv'nor was back again.

The negro ran forward and indulged in a jig.

"Hallelujah, Massa Bawdab Bullet!" he cried.

"Dis chile is tickled cleah out ob his moccasins wid joy. Golly! but I's had de dweefulest time ebah known. De Shoos mos' eat me up, an' dey would, ef I hadn't killed 'bout ten millions ob dem; but I nevah suspected to see you'-uns ag'in. I's b'en a dweeful wicked niggah, an' I's b'en tryin' to repent, but—"

"Peace!" interrupted Mountain Eagle. "Boy with the dark face, your friends are in the cave. Go to them! Sharpshooter, where is Nevermiss?"

"He has gone to reconnoiter. What is the meaning of the firing?"

"Nolaw and his traitor soldiers are attacked, and their assailants are men from the fort they deserted. The retribution which white men call Nemesis is at their heels. Loyal wearers of the blue are here."

"I suspected as much."

"There will be fighting," grimly continued the chief, "and my place is not here. I think Nolaw's men are all cut to pieces, but Storm-Cloud still lives. He hates the blue-coats, and the battle will rage hotly. I go to the fight with my men!"

"Must you do it?" asked the hunter, deeply troubled.

"I am an Indian," was the steady reply, "and I follow the fortunes of my race. I am not eager to fight the blue-coats, but I have no love for them, and I will fight whoever invades the land of the Sioux."

"I hope your aid to us has not been discovered."

"No. The warrior whom I bound and left on the island has been liberated, but he does not even suspect that it was one of his own tribe who attacked him; he says it was a white man. I am safe. Enough for now. Tell Nevermiss the news when he returns, and let him go to the leader of the soldiers at once. Let him place the women in safe hands as soon as possible. Delay not in this. I go to my warriors! Farewell!"

The chief had spoken with far greater rapidity than usual, and at the last word he turned away. With movements as light as those of a mountain goat, he sprung from rock to rock up the ascent to the left, and soon disappeared from sight.

Border Bullet stood irresolutely at the entrance. What ought he to do? Yank was absent, and some one ought to go to the soldiers at once. But the mountaineer would doubtless learn the exact state of affairs and do all that was necessary.

The young man's place was with the women.

Guv'nor was exhibiting himself as a hero within the cave, but Border Bullet remained at the entrance. He heard no more firing. Utter silence reigned all around.

There was natural excitement among the other fugitives. Guv'nor, who, since he had been left behind by Old Porcupine, had been hiding here and there in the hills, and had been found by Mountain Eagle by chance, and learned enough to tell a fairly coherent story, and he did not fail to do his best to make it a thrilling one.

Richard Prior spoke in a low voice to Agnes.

"Will you walk toward the entrance with me?" he asked.

She acquiesced, but he went only far enough to make their words inaudible to other ears.

"Agnes, pardon me, but I have a word to say to you. I fear that it will be disagreeable for you to hear me speak of your affairs, for you have cause only to hate me—"

"Richard," she interrupted, tremulously, "do not speak that way. I have not forgotten how bravely you risked danger for me in our late adventures."

"Have you forgotten," he bitterly asked, "how cruelly I put shame and disgrace upon you a few years ago?"

Agnes's face flushed, and then grew pale.

"I don't think you intended to wrong me," she humbly replied, pressing one hand over her fast-beating heart.

"That is no excuse for me. You were my wife, and I was bound by every dictate of honor to know what I was doing before I took a decisive step. I thought I did know. You told me I was wrong; that you were either the victim of a plot or a singular combination of circumstances, but I would not hear to you. You know what followed."

Richard paused, brushed his hand nervously across his forehead, and then, giving Agnes no time to answer, rapidly continued:

"Since we met here in the Black Hills, fate has thrown us strangely together. At first I avoided you, as you know, and gave free rein to my resentment; but when I became protector to you after you were separated from Yank, I had no choice but to be on familiar terms. For twenty-four hours our fortunes were one, and I had a chance to observe that same patient, modest, retiring manner I once knew so well. You urged me to desert you; to leave you to your fate and think only of my own safety. I thought, when I had time to think calmly, that this was not the way of a guilty woman. In brief, Agnes, my every conviction is changed, and I believe that you were innocent; that you never eloped with Reginald Eyre, but were the victim of a plot or a terrible mistake. Would to Heaven my hot temper had not blinded my eyes at the time! And now that there is hope of rescue, let me humbly ask that you will think of me as leniently as you can. I dare not ask you to forgive me."

Agnes's face was a panorama of strong emotions, among which hope showed supreme.

"I have nothing to forgive," she replied, tremulously, "for I know you were the victim of a mistake."

"But my cruelty—"

"If it had been as you thought, your conduct would have been no more than just."

"But I should have trusted you."

"You were deceived by circumstances."

"You will not blame me, yet I am all to blame. It is like you—like your noble nature. I hope you will think, in the future, as kindly as you can of the miserable wretch who would not dare to ask to be your friend."

"Oh! Richard, Richard! How can you say that?"

"It is true. My eyes are opened, and all my heart cries out to you. Yet—yet—I can't help saying it—I would give ten years of my life if I could take my old place in your affections, and again call you my wife!"

The words broke almost fiercely from his lips, but Agnes was given no chance to answer.

Footsteps rung on the rocky floor, and Yank Yellowbird and Border Bullet hastily entered the cave.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BATTLE.

"ALL hands on deck!" cried the mountaineer, in his most cheerful manner. "We're goin' ter leave this hole in the ground right away. True-blue United States sojers are at hand, an' thar will be safe guidance fur you all ter civilized parts. I've seen the gin'r'l o' the party—or corporal, I forget which he is—an' he says you're ter come right along, so pack up an' we'll leave. Guv'nor, hustle around an' git the bosses, an' don't let any on 'em step on your feet. Your hoofs are flat as a pancake now, an' more o' the shape ain't desirable."

"Sir," exclaimed Abigail severely, "I would like ter hev you speak with more o' human feelin' ter that boy. I hev entered inter an' agreement with him by which he will sign a temperance pledge, an' go with me ter Cloveryard, Connecticut, ter be exhibited as a brand plucked from the burnin', an' an awful example o' the drinkin's an' carousin's that hev b'en goin' on here."

"Land o' Goshen, Miss Longstrider, hev you b'en drinkin'? I never noticed it."

By this time all was ready for departure. Border Bullet and Guv'nor had brought the horses; Yank had deftly packed their few articles of household importance; Richard and Agnes had exchanged a few more words, which made the latter's face beam with a new expression of happiness; and they had only to go.

Yank led the way.

Moses seemed to feel that the occasion was momentous. He kept close to his master, and his manner was suspicious and belligerent. Moses never showed ill-temper to his master, or his master's friends, but he had the appearance of a dog who, finding a good deal of wickedness in the world, had grown sour and misanthropic, and was only kept from acting aggressively to his best friends by the idea that no member of his species could retain his standing in society unless he also retained his dignity.

They had gone about half-way to where Yank had seen the soldiers when the delusive calm was suddenly broken. A single rifle-shot rung out on the air, and half a dozen others followed. Then came a volley, as of a score of muskets blended—plainly the work of soldiers. Indian war-whoops ended the startling combination; and all these sounds were dangerously near the fugitives.

"Hold up!" Yank exclaimed. "Rein yer bosses inter this niche. Ef we go on, we'll git inter some egregious tribulation. We will, by hurley!"

Nearer and nearer came the tide of battle, and men suddenly became visible on the hillside. Yank's keen eyes soon discovered that the soldiers were driving the Indians, though only a comparatively small number were engaged on either side. The Sioux retreated slowly, contesting the ground stubbornly. Yank had just discovered that one person among them was a white man when that person made himself more conspicuous.

"Rally, braves of the great Sioux nation!" he shouted. "Hold your ground, and give the enemy lead and steel. Rally! Show no mercy to the invaders of your country! Beat them back! Down with the invaders!"

The speaker was Nolaw, and he was fighting like a tiger. Men were falling around him, but he did not waver. To his natural courage had been added that of desperation, and he was more revengeful than the Sioux themselves.

The latter answered with wild yells, and the battle raged more hotly. It was hand-to-hand, at last. Nolaw had emptied his revolvers, but he now drew his sword—the weapon he had so disgraced—and fought with unwavering courage.

"Pity a man like him is such villain!" muttered Yank.

"No doubt he was brought to it by drinkin'," asserted Abigail, rallying from a condition of almost comatose fear. "Oh! the wickedness o' man! Oh! oh!"

"The savages retreat no longer!" exclaimed Border Bullet.

"They do seem ter hev got a new grip."

"Nolaw's example is contagious."

"Nolaw will git cut down in the flower o' his youth, ef he don't look out!" retorted Nevermiss, with a frown. "Wish I could jine in the 'ruption, by hurley, but I consait all o' the Body-Guard is needed hyar."

"Are we safe here, mountaineer?"

"No; an' we ain't safe nowhar. A disarrangement o' the status o' battle may put us inter the wu'st on't at any time, but what better kin we do by shiftin' our position? Who knows which way the tide o' fightin' will flow? Even my gran'father, the Revolutionary relict, couldn't diagnose the case, fur the tick-tacks o' war ain't no account when atrocious red insex are batlin'."

Yank stroked his beard in a quick, perturbed way, while Moses growled savagely and exposed his teeth as he glared at the combatants on the hillside.

Suddenly a party of Sioux came running across the level, heading for the scene of strife.

It was a sudden change from peace to war, but they had to deal with men as brave as themselves. Yank and Border Bullet fired almost simultaneously, and two yelling warriors went down never to rise. Richard Prior was but a little behind, and three of the Sioux never reached the line. The others did, and in a moment all was confusion. The fight was hand-to-hand, and the whites had to watch their chance to use their revolvers.

Yank Yellowbird made no such attempt. His reliance was still in his long rifle, and he reversed the weapon and used it as a club. Standing in front of the women he swung the rifle as though it had been a toy, and whenever it fell an Indian dropped.

Yet, the "Body-Guard" was hard-pressed. Border Bullet and Prior were doing their utmost, and they stood grimly by their leader, but the force of numbers was against them. A blow brought Richard to his knee, and a stalwart savage raised his arm for the final stroke.

Then a dark form, which looked not unlike a panther, leaped upon the Sioux. It was Moses, turned for the time into an incarnate fury; and he bore the Indian to the ground resistlessly.

Only one arose, and that one was Moses. The Indian had struck his last blow. Not so with the dog: from the first to the last of the fight he was an active participator, and his systematic attacks and great strength made him the equal of a man.

Despite all this, matters were going hard with the heroic little band when there was a new diversion.

Nolaw and the Sioux had found the fight too warm for them, and they gave ground—were hotly pressed—became demoralized, and were driven rapidly down the slope. Swept by the pursuit they were driven to the very place where Yank and his friends were making their desperate stand, and the assailants of the Body-Guard were swallowed up in the retreating warriors and carried away.

The soldiers charged past, and the devoted band were again left to themselves.

"We've got a breathin' spell, by hurley!" exclaimed Yank. "Is anybody hurt?"

No one answered. All of the men were bleeding from slight wounds, but they would not complain of them then.

Clearly, the decisive battle was in progress not far away, and rifle reports, shouts and whoops made a din as confused as it was terrible to weak nerves. Miss Longstreeter fell upon her knees and tried to embrace Yank.

"Save me! save me!" she wailed, frantically. "Oh! dear, noble, *lovely* Mr. Yellowbird, don't let 'em git me! I al'ays liked you because you don't drink. Save me!"

"A Shoo!" cried Guv'nor, dancing with terror. "We shall be eat up an' burned at de stake, an' I ain't had time to repent!"

The old, familiar signal sounded, and Mountain Eagle bounded to the spot.

"Where is Nevermiss?" he demanded, in a ringing voice. "The battle goes on hotly, and no one can tell what the end will be. Storm-Cloud rages like a panther, and his young men are full of valor. Nevermiss, waste no time but follow me; I will guide you to the blue-coats."

"Mount, an' arter him like a cyclone!" ordered the mountaineer, his usually placid voice ringing out as sharply and commanding as the chief's. "No more talkin' now—this is the time o' action, by hurley!"

In a wonderfully short time the niche was deserted and all were hurrying after Mountain Eagle. Yank kept close to the red leader, and Moses went side-by-side with his master. The chief set a rapid race, and his face was often turned toward the scene of battle. He thirsted to be in the affray, fighting with his comrades.

His pledge was well kept, and at the end of ten minutes they were at the rear of the soldiers' position.

"Here we part," he abruptly said; "I go to my warriors. Nevermiss, the Great Spirit only knows when we shall meet again, but this remember always: The heart of Mountain Eagle is warm toward his white brother!"

"Injun," was the quick response, "your skin an' mine don't bear the same color, but I consait our hearts are fashioned pooty nigh alike. Go, but remember Yank Yellowbird is your frien', ter death. May you always find as good help in your hour o' tribulation as we hev found in ourn!"

The two men clasped hands for a moment, and then Mountain Eagle bounded away. He soon disappeared among the rocks, and they saw him no more.

"As good a man as ever lived, ef he has a dark skin!" the mountaineer asserted, with emphasis.

"But he goes to fight against us," doubtfully observed Prior.

"Not ag'in' us, but ag'in' the sojers. What more kin you expect? He's an Injun, an' wild as the eagle he's named fur. Blood will tell. Yes, he'll fight, but it'll be like a man. No egregious cruelty will ever be associated with the name o' Mountain Eagle. Thar won't, by hurley!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A WOUNDED MAN'S REVELATION.

YANK and Border Bullet anxiously watched the progress of the battle. A few bullets dropped near them, and Moses elevated his nose and growled menacingly.

"They run! they run!" exclaimed Nevermiss. "See the red insex go! I'll be condemn'd ef the sojer-chaps ain't put them ter flight, an' I reckon the hull affair will soon be settled. Storm-Cloud ain't got the force ter carry all before him, an' one good shakin' up will give him his fill o' war, I consait."

The blue-coats retraced their steps, and our friends were soon in conversation with the leader.

"A decisive victory," the latter said. "Burkeigh, or Nolaw, as I hear he renamed himself, is dead, and what few of the minor deserters outlived him are our prisoners. Our work is done, and we shall return to the fort if the Sioux allow it."

"I consait thar mou't be no great amount o' trouble as ter that," Yank returned.

"As for your party," pursued the officer, "I shall be pleased to give you safe escort to the settlements. We will go at daylight."

"That'll suit most o' our party wal. The Black Hills ain't the best o' places ter start a colony. It's egregious hard ter git acclimated; I've knowed them who lost their hair tryin' it."

A soldier approached and saluted his superior

"There is a dying man over there, sir, who has asked to see one of the ladies. Inez, he called her. He said his name was Leavitt, or something like that."

"It's Leg-it, sure's your's alive!" exclaimed Yank. "Whar is Inez? Break it lightly ter her—"

"I have heard all," the girl replied, very calmly. "They say my father is dying. I will go to him."

They walked to where Old Porcupine lay.

"Keep back, all o' you but Inez!" he said, hoarsely, but petulantly, and with an angry glare of his eyes. "I won't be crowded. Come, girl! Be cool now, an' don't make b'lieve you hev any affection you don't feel. You an' I ain't off the same piece, an' no love is lost, but you've stuck to me through thick an' thin, an' I'll do ye a good turn ter pay ye before I go."

He pressed his hand to his side.

"The bullet hurts," he said, "but it'll soon be over. I only wish I could git a whack at the red devil who shot me. Yes—it was an Injun, an' twas done ter satisfy a grudge. Do ye remember the day we left our hut so sudden—the day Dick Prior come to us? Wal, I'd never left that place only fur one thing. I had a row with a Sioux an' shot him, an' I knowed his frien's would be after me. I was a good bit disturbed when I come home that day, an' that's why we left the hut; but it did no good. Ter-night, the brother o' the dead Injun shot *me*—he'd found the truth out, some way."

The dying man turned his gaze upon Border Bullet.

"Come hyar, Philip Morgan!" he directed.

The Sharpshooter advanced.

"Young feller," Lefferts continued, "I've always hated you, but fur the sake o' Inez I'll bury the feud in my own grave. You an' her had better marry. She liked you at Yellow River, but I lied ter separate you. I told her you was a detective. You wa'n't, but I'd once got inter a scrape through another man named Morgan. *He* was a detective, an' you are his son."

"My late father was a detective," Border Bullet admitted.

"Sartain. I've hated you fur his sake, but I'll drop it ter please Inez. The myst'ry at Yellow River is cleared up. I had no hand in the robbery. It was done by a chap knowed as 'Bantam Jim,' an' he is in prison now. He confessed, too, an' tol' whar he got yer knife, which was found in the store. He found it on the ground, whar you must a' lost it. That's the full story, an' you an' Inez kin fix yer affairs alone. I've said all I've got ter say. Go away, all of ye, an' let me die alone!"

"Father," said Inez, earnestly, "you can tell something more. You know certain things relating to Agnes Prior and—"

"I won't tell!" fiercely replied Old Porcupine. "The secret shall die with me. Not a word will I tell."

Inez hesitated, and then turned to the others.

"Leave me alone with him," she said.

They obeyed and withdrew beyond the sound of her voice.

"I consait it'll all come out right," observed Yank Yellowbird, nodding to Agnes. "Most things do come around that way in time. Now, hyar's Miss Longstepper; she's had a most egregious time on't with the iniquities o' the world, but I'll bet a beaver-skin she reforms the hull outfit, yet."

"Thar would be hopes," solemnly replied the distinguished lady, "ef it wasn't fur misguided man. Woman is a tender creature, an' like the daisies o' the field, but *man* is a viper. He is given to drinkin's an' carousin's an' be clasps the liquid foe o' the human race to his heart. Oh! the perverse generation! Oh! the moral monstrosity o' man! Oh! the wine-bibbin' an' the turpitude o' the wicked. Oh! oh!"

"Oh! oh!" quoth Nevermiss, mournfully. "By hurley, Miss Longstriker, it worries me mortally ter see the tribulations you hev with them male monsters. Congress ought to pass a law puttin' 'em down an' stoppin' them from puttin' down liquor. You ought ter go afore Congress, m'm, an' s'plain your views. You'd make the male poperlation so ashamed they'd burn their raiment an' buy a trunkful o' silk gowns. Not an artom o' doubt on't!"

"I trust I do my duty," modestly answered Abigail, "an' thar is some fruit o' my labor. Behold this boy here! I found him grovelin' in vile wickedness, an' growin' up among carousin's which could only lead him ter drink, but I hev'reclaimed him. He goes back to Cloveryard, Connecticut, with me, an' I shall present him ter the sisters o' the Anti-Demon-of-Drink Society as a pledge o' the glorious work I've did in the wicked West."

"Dat am a fact," corroborated Guv'nor. "I've been a dwefful wicked niggah, but I'se goin' ter Cloveryard to repent an' be an awful egg-slayer."

"Beautiful idee!" exclaimed the mountaineer, beaming upon the colored youth. "All you need

now is my lamented gran'father, ter post yer in mil'tary tick-tacks, but he's not whar he kin come, so you'll hev ter depend on our fair reformer. Don't yer never take a drink o' root-beer, Guv'nor, onless ye hev an atrocious attack o' malignant newrolgy."

"One word, Nevermiss," interrupted Border Bullet. "I think you owe us an explanation in regard to Mountain Eagle."

"Mebbe you're right, an' it's yours. He was born a Modoc, Mountain Eagle was; an' his name was Trail-Lifter. He foller'd my fortunes fur sev'ral year, when he's a mere boy, on the trail an' in camp, an' helped me in sev'ral del'ket operations. Durin' this time I used ter call him Still Tongue, now an' then, 'cause he pretended ter be dumb. Ef you ever meet Ben Bucking-ham, Gold Gauntlet or the Duke o' Dakota—all old associates o' mine—ask them about the young Modoc. He was too wild at heart fur my tame life, though, an' he jined his present companions. But he's as good as gold, Mountain Eagle is."

Inez approached the group.

"Father wishes to see you, Mr. Prior, and Agnes," she said.

They went forward quickly.

"She's done it," said Old Porcupine, hoarsely. "Ef you make up, credit it all ter Inez. Dick Prior, your wife never run away with Reginald Eyre. He wanted her, an' he laid a plot ter separate you. Witnesses at the divorce trial swore they saw your wife, close vailed, in the wagon with Eyre. I'll tell ye how 'twas. Eyre was a rascal, an' as I'd done a bit o' work fur him, he come ter me in a town a few miles away. He asked me, could I find a woman who would steal Mrs. Prior's clothes, put 'em on, an' ride with him, close vailed? I prodded the woman, a gal named Annie Rose.

"Your wife, Dick, went on a visit with your cousin, an' Eyre sprung his trap. The clothes was stole; Annie Rose rode with him, takin' care ter be seen; an' then the clothes was put back whar they b'longed. That's why honest witnesses swore ag'in' your wife at the trial. I ain't got the strength ter explain more, but ef you find the Rose gal—she's still thar—she'll tell all."

"Your wife wouldn't even look at Eyre arter the trial, an' he give it up, went to St. Louis, an' was shot in a gamblin'-room. Lieutenant Nolaw was an acquaintance o' Eyre's, but he never knowed all. An' now the sojers hev shot Nolaw! We're all goin' off the scene. Agnes, I tol' ye a few days ago that Dick Prior had talked ter me about the case. I lied; he never did it; never said a word. That's all I kin say. Now leave me alone!"

They all went except Inez. Evil as the man had been, she remembered the tie of relationship and stayed with him until he died.

Richard and Agnes thought only of themselves, and the former was all the happier because he came to trust in his wife again before Old Porcupine's dying confession.

"I consait the clouds are rollin' away, Border Bullet," observed Yank. "The sun always drives the clouds away in course o' time. All the Yellowbirds hev noticed the fack, an' my fu'st ancestor, Adam, left a written dissipation on the subjick. All o' my fam'ly was handy with a pen, though I consait I kin best hold up the Yellowbird pedigree with my rifle. Give me that, an' Moses an' my hoss; with the prairie fur a bed, an' I won't meddle with pens and ink. I won't, by hurley!"

The return to the settlement was safely made, and there Yank Yellowbird left them. Accompanied by the dumb companions of his nomadic life, he went back to the scenes he liked best.

Richard and Agnes returned to their old home. The girl, Annie Rose, was found, and forced to make a confession. Reunited in heart, as well as by marriage law, the Priors began a new life as peaceful as their old one had been stormy, and neither has had cause for regret.

Border Bullet did not lose sight of Inez, and at the end of one year she became his wife. Unlike his old associate of the prairie, he found domestic happiness more congenial than scenes of adventure in the Wild West.

Miss Longstreeter took Guv'nor to Connecticut, and he was duly presented as a reclaimed sinner. The eminent lady was rapturously received by the sisters of Anti-Demon-of-Drink Society, and when she had related her adventures in the Black Hills, she was unanimously elected president of the society. True, Guv'nor could remember none of those adventures, and his faith in her veracity was shaken, but as he was getting a good living, at her expense, as a reclaimed drunkard, he held his place and kept on "repenting." Abigail still believes, whenever she meets a man, that he has been "drinkin'," and the wickedness of the world shocks her; but she finds consolation in the companionship of her "sisters."

Storm-Cloud survived the fight, but died of a wound soon after he had led his warriors away. Mountain Eagle escaped all suspicion of double-dealing, and continued his old career.

The deserters were duly punished, and the leader of the party that had captured them only regretted that Nolaw had not lived to meet retribution in the same way.

THE END.

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367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.
379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
387 Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.
395 Deadly Aim, the Duke of Derringers.
403 The Nameless Sport.
409 Rob Roy Ranch; or, The Imps of Pan Handle.
416 Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck.
426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Spy of the Secret Service.
433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.
438 Oklahoma Nick.
443 A Cool Hand; or, Pistol Johnny's Picnic.
450 The Rustler Detective.
458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzberg.
466 Old Rough and Ready, the Sage of Sundown.
474 Daddy Dead-Eye, the Despot of Dew Drop.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES.

278 Hercules Goldspur, the Man of the Velvet Hand.
294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.
335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
352 The Desperate Dozen.
365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
441 The California Sharp.
447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
488 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
480 Hawkspear, the Man with a Secret.

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80 A Man of Nerve; or, Caliban the Dwarf.
114 The Gentleman from Pike.
171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.
207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.
251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron D-spar.
280 Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.
299 Three of a Kind; or, Tiger Dick, Iron Despard and the Sportive Sport.
338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.
359 Yellow Jack, the Mestizo.
380 Tiger Dick's Pledge; or, The Golden Serpent.
404 Silver Sid; or, A "Daisy" Bluff.
431 California Kit, the Always on Hand.
472 Six Foot Si; or, The Man to "Tie To."

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38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
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49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
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97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
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107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
130 Captain Volcano; or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
320 The Genteel Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
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